FISHPINGLE

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FISHPINGLE

A ROMANCE OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

BY
HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL
AUTHOR OF
"BROTHERS," "THE HILL," "THE TRIUMPH OF TIM," ETC.

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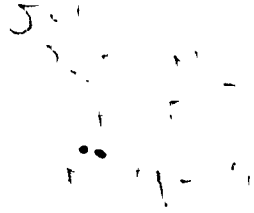

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TO THE

COUNTRY GENTLEMEN OF ENGLAND

I DEDICATE

THIS BOOK

PREFACE

A ROMANCE of the Countryside needs no preface. But underlying the adventures and misadventures of this story is an obvious purpose, and the importunities of any purpose, if denied expression in the main narrative, do press forward, with a justifiable relevance, when that narrative is completed. I could wish that it had been possible to deal with my theme as it will present itself after the war, when the position of the country gentlemen of this kingdom is likely to be even more poignant than in pre-war days. It seems to me almost certain that the type of man whom I have endeavoured to pourtray faithfully in these pages will become extinct unless he and his justify their claim to existence by dealing drastically with the problem that confronts them, a problem far more difficult of solution than it was four years ago. If the men who own land, and little else, wish to keep that land, they must make it pay by the sacrifice of much they hold dear; they must abandon their

deep ruts and take the high-road of progress. What is needed jumps to any observant eye—intimate knowledge of a difficult subject. The old dogs won't learn the new tricks. But their sons must learn them, if they wish to inherit the family acres. I am of the opinion that it will be a bad day for England when the Squires are scrapped. If they are scrapped, it will be their own fault. Heirs to many acres cannot, in the future, pass the most valuable and fructifying years of their lives in crack regiments, or anywhere else. They must stick to the land, and concentrate undivided energies upon it. No man who has studied agricultural conditions at first hand in France, for example, will deny the fact that even thin, sterile soil can be made productive. To achieve triumphantly such a task postulates the exercise of qualities which insure success in any other business—economy, patience, fortitude, and common sense. The big industrial concerns are owned and managed by experts. Agriculture—the backbone of England—is in the hands, for the most part, of amateurs. Some large farmers may be cited as exceptions, but the landowners, the smaller farmers, and the labourers who till their allotments simply don't know their business, and accordingly make a muddle of it. I do not believe that the allotment schemes, which sound so plausible, will prosper under the protection

of Government, until the landowners and farmers first set an example of "how to do it." The wastage everywhere is appalling. Why is it that Scotch farmers, confronted with greater difficulties as regards soil and climate, are able to pay so much higher wages than English farmers? Because they are thriftier and more intelligent. But you can't raise a man's intelligence by giving him land of his own, and then telling him to go ahead and prosper. Much more is wanted.

I have spoken of the necessity of sacrifice. The Squires will have to give up certain luxuries, such as a season in London, foreign travel, and crippling allowances to idle sons. But sport should remain their inalienable possession if they pursue it as a pastime and not as the principal business of their lives. Hunting, shooting, and fishing are national assets within reasonable limitations. Long may they flourish! It is not the Squires who have imposed the tyranny of sport upon their people, but the plutocrats. Much undiluted nonsense has been written against hunting and shooting mainly by men who are grossly ignorant of their subject, bent upon citing extreme instances which, when investigated, turn out to be absolutely exceptional. Editors of influential papers still encourage these gentlemen of the pen to attack dukes because deer forests in the Highlands are not planted to

potatoes! Why not try oranges or bananas? Triumphant democracy still believes that it is more sportsmanlike to walk up birds and "tailor" them, instead of killing them as they are driven to the guns, flying fast and high overhead.

When this theme of the countryside first presented itself to me, I was tempted to take, as a type, what is called a "bad" landowner, one who neglects wilfully his responsibilities and duties. Unhappily, there are many such. But these petty tyrants are irreclaimable. Unquestionably they *will* be scrapped. And the sooner the better! Hope of salvation lies with men like Sir Geoffrey Pomfret, true lovers of the soil, but helplessly ignorant of its potentialities. In this category are not included the very few magnates who can and do employ experts to manage their estates. These few must make it their business to spread the knowledge for which, by costly experiments, they have paid a tremendous price. They, and they alone, are really qualified and able to put men upon allotments and demonstrate what intelligence and ingenuity can accomplish.

A last word. I wrote a book and a comedy entitled "Quinneys'." The book appeared first and then the play. Some critics took for granted that the play was a dramatization of the novel. They happened to be wrong. The comedy was

written before the book. In this case, my comedy "Fishpingle" was produced at the Haymarket Theatre in 1916. The novel will appear in 1917. I leave it to the same critics to guess which was written first.

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL.

BEECHWOOD,
April, 1917.

FISHPINGLE

CHAPTER I

FISHPINGLE'S room at Pomfret Court challenged the interest of visitors to that ancient manor-house. It had been part of the original Pomfret House destroyed by fire in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Walls, floor, and ceiling were of stone quarried on the estate and laid by a master-builder, who, obviously, had revelled in the eccentricities of his craft. The general effect was that of a crypt, although a big window, facing south, and looking into a charming courtyard, had been cut out of the wall in 1830. This window, however, was Pseudo-Gothic in character, and not too offensive to the critical eye. And the furniture, also, waifs and strays from all parts of the house, stout, time-mellowed specimens, presented a happy homogeneity, as if they, at least, were content with this last resting-place. A Cromwellian table, upon which Cavaliers had cut their initials, faced the wide open fireplace. In the alcoves flanking the hearth stood two Queen Anne tallboys, much battered. Opposite to them was a Sheraton bookcase and bureau

roughly restored by the village carpenter. The chairs were mostly eighteenth century. But oak, walnut and mahogany twinkled at each other harmoniously, polished by unlimited elbow-grease to a rich golden sameness of tint, the one tint which the faker of old furniture is, happily, unable to reproduce.

This room had been known as the Steward's Room in the time of Sir Geoffrey Pomfret's predecessor and father. Fishpingle came into possession when he was installed as butler long after Sir Geoffrey's accession to the family honours. Some forty years had passed since then, but the room retained its ancient uses, inasmuch as Fishpingle was recognised and even acclaimed as steward rather than butler, whose stewardship was the more real because it concerned itself loyally with cause and disdained effect. Sir Geoffrey boasted with good reason that he was the most approachable of squires. He may not have been aware that Fishpingle soaped the ways upon which importunate tenants slid from cottage to hall. Fishpingle served as an encyclopædia of information concerning the more intimate details of estate management. He kept a big diary. In the tallboys were filed papers and memoranda. Sir Geoffrey's only son, Lionel, and Lady Pomfret shared a saying which had mellowed into a crusted family joke: "Fishpingle knows."

Upon the stone walls were some fine heads of fallow deer, and half a dozen cases of stuffed birds and fish. Fishpingle, it might be inferred,

was something of an angler and naturalist. A glance at his bookcase revealed his interest in horse and hound. Beckford was there, and Daniel's "Rural Sports," and Izaac Walton. In the place of honour shone conspicuous a morocco-bound, richly-tooled, gilded volume—
—"Stemmata Pomfretiana." This genealogical work had been compiled, regardless of expense, by Sir Geoffrey's grandfather, who had wasted time and money in pursuit of other and less harmless interests. It was he indeed, who encumbered a fine estate with a large and crippling mortgage.

Into Fishpingle's room came Alfred Rockley, the first footman, carrying a handsome tankard in one hand and a "chammy" leather in the other. Alfred was a good-looking young fellow, racy of the Wiltshire soil, born and bred upon the Pomfret estates and quite willing to serve a master who lived upon those estates and did not own (or lease) a house in town. A reason for this contentment will appear immediately.

Alfred placed the tankard, bottom uppermost, upon the Cromwellian table, and stared at it intently with a slight frown upon his ordinarily pleasant countenance. Then he picked it up, rubbed it softly, and began to inspect himself in its shining surface. This agreeable task so engrossed him that he failed to notice the sly approach of a maid-servant, who followed a tip-tilted nose into the room. The nose belonged to Prudence Rockley, a cousin of Alfred and the stillroom maid of the establishment. She carried

a feather duster and a smile which, so Sir Geoffrey affirmed, was worth an extra five pounds a year in wages.

"Boo!" said she.

Alfred dropped the tankard and caught it again deftly. The Squire encouraged cricket. Prudence laughed. Alfred displayed some irritation.

"There you go again."

He spoke with the Wilts accent, an accent dear to the Squire and his lady, as being the unmistakable voice of "his" people. Prudence shrugged a pretty pair of shoulders as she answered with the same rising inflection:

"I'll go, Alfred, if so be as I'm disturbing you at your—*work*."

"I came nigh on droppin' the bloomin' mug."

As he spoke, he rubbed it caressingly, but his eyes dwelt even more caressingly upon the stillroom maid, who, noting his glance, began dusting the articles upon the table. As she moved from the young man, she murmured interrogatively:

"Why ever have 'ee brought it in here?"

"I'll tell 'ee, if you'll give us a kiss, Prue."

"Don't 'ee be silly!"

Alfred retorted with conviction

"If it be silly to want to kiss 'ee, I be the biggest fule in the parish. 'Ee didn't want coaxin' las' night, Prue."

To this Prudence replied with alluring directness and simplicity.

"Be good, Alfie. If you kiss me afore

'elevenses' my cheeks 'll be red as fire, and Uncle Ben 'll ask questions."

Alfred let this soak in, as he rubbed the shining tankard. Then he spoke decisively

"I want un to ask questions. Sooner the better. Our gettin' wed depends, seein'ly, upon your Uncle Ben."

The significance of his tone was not lost upon the maid. Her straight brows puckered slightly as she asked :

"But—why? You said that las' night, you did."

Alfred laid down the tankard and held aloft a handsome silver inkstand.

"It be here, Prue." Then he read aloud an inscription. "'Presented to Benoni Fishpingle, after fifty years' service, by his affectionate friends, Sir Geoffrey and Lady Pomfret.' *Affectionate!* Ah-h-h-h! They do think the world o' Benoni Fishpingle, they do. Now, Prue, you coax your Uncle Ben, and then he'll downscramble Squire. Tell un that we be a fine upstandin' couple, a credit to Nether Applewhite."

"That don't need tellin', Alfie."

Alfred put down the inkstand and approached the maid, smiling at her. He wagged his head knowingly.

"They got on to it at dinner las' night. Yas, they did."

He chuckled and took her hand in his.

"Got on to—what?"

"Eugannicks."

He spoke so solemnly that Prudence was vastly impressed.

"Eugannicks," she repeated, "what's that?"

Alfred hesitated.

"Eugannicks be—eugannicks."

"You're a oner at explainin' things to a pore young maid, you be."

Alfred stiffened, but he pressed her hand softly.

"It's like this, Prue. I can't explain eugannicks to a young maid, rich or pore—see?"

"No, I don't. S'pose," she dimpled with mischief, "s'pose you try."

Alfred's face brightened. Inspiration illumined it.

"You ask your Uncle Ben. Never so happy he be as when enlightenin' ignorance."

She withdrew her hand.

"Ignorance? Thank you. I will ask un."

Alfred sighed with relief.

"Do. All the same, if you think red bain't so becomin' early in the marning, do 'ee put off askin' un till after tea."

Prudence betrayed a livelier interest.

"Mercy! Why should eugannicks make me blush?"

Alfred chuckled again.

"You ask your Uncle Ben."

Prudence nodded, satisfied that interrogation could not be pushed further. Her eyes were caught by the gleaming tankard.

"That be a be—utiful mug, Alfie."

"Don't 'ee touch it. I'll tell 'ee why I

brought un in here, and take payment after supper. The story be a kind o' parryble."

Prudence laughed.

"What big, brave words!"

Alfred pointed at the tankard. Unconsciously, he began to understudy the tone and manner of the village parson. We shall meet this gentleman presently. For the moment it is enough to say that he was a man of character and influence. He had taught Alfred in Sunday school and prepared him for Confirmation.

"The parryble o' that there tankard 'll learn ee——"

"Teach me, Alfie——"

Prudence had reason to believe herself better educated than her cousin. She used the country dialect because it would have been "grand" to speak otherwise. But her uncle, Benoni Fishpingle, spoke English as free from accent as Sir Geoffrey's, and expressed himself with even greater lucidity.

"Will learn 'ee what sort of an old fusspot your Uncle Ben be. When I first comes here, ten year ago, 'twas well rubbed into me that this yere tankard," he held it up again, "was worth its weight in gold. William an' Mary."

"William and Mary?"

"King William and Queen Mary. Bloody Mary he called her."

"My! What ever did she call him?"

Alfred was unable to answer this question. Gazing solemnly at the tankard, he continued in the same impressive tone:

"I dunno. In them ancient days I warn't allowed to touch the dam thing. Not worthy, accordin' to your Uncle Fusspots. But when I becomes first footman it was my duty—an' privilege—to clean 'un once a week. Now, Prue, you mark well what follers. I cleaned un yes'dy afternoon, an' put un back in pantry safe. Fusspots was there, a-watchin' me out o' the corner of his eye. Then I had to answer the library bell. When I comes back to pantry this yere tankard was sittin' bottom-up on floor!"

Prudence gave an astonished gasp as she repeated his words:

"Bottom-up on floor?"

Alfred nodded, almost pontifically. He had caught and held the pretty maid's interest in his narrative. His tone dropped mysteriously.

"Knowin' my man, so to speak, and his lil' endearin' ways I says never a word, but I picks up the mug and cleans un all over again. I puts it back in safe an' presently Fusspots sends me in here to fetch his specs. When I gets back, I'm a liar if that there tankard warn't wrong side up on floor again."

He paused dramatically. Prudence's blue eyes were sparkling; a brace of dimples played hide and seek upon her rosy cheeks.

"Well, I never!"

Alfred just touched the shining silver with his "chammy."

"I looks at tankard, an' Fusspots he looks at me with that queer grin o' his. I'd half a

mind to kick the mug into next parish, but I remains most handsomely calm—yas, I did. Then I goes to work on a teapot. Presently the old un says blandly, 'Alferd, where's my specs?' I give him his specs and he shoves him on. Then he just looks at me over the top of 'em, and he says, 'My lad,' he says, 'whatever is that settin' on floor?' I answers up, just as innocent as you be, Prue——"

Prudence pouted, looking prettier than ever.

"I bain't innocent, Alfie."

Alfred glanced through the window and kissed her.

"I answers then, just so full o' sauce as you be, 'Why, Mr. Fishpingle,' I says, ''tis the tankard what I cleaned so be—utiful five minutes ago.' 'Hold hard,' he says, 'are you sure, my lad, that it is clean?' That fair madded me, Prue, an' I lets go my left——"

Prudence gasped again.

"Alferd Rockley, you never hit Uncle Ben surely?"

"Figure o' speech, my maid. I says: 'I be just so sure 'tis clean, as you be sure o' salvation.'"

"What a nerve!" murmured Prudence.

"I thought I'd fair landed un. Not a bit! He answers up, very quiet-like: 'Alferd,' he says, 'I bain't sure o' my salvation. Pick up that tankard, my lad, and put it in safe. You can clean it properly to-morrow marnin'. At a quarter to eleven, you put un on the table in my room—*bottom up.*' Now I asks you,

Prue, is that tankard cleaned a fair treat, or is it not? Don't 'ee touch un!"

As he ended his amazing narrative, Alfred solemnly placed the tankard, bottom up, on the table, inviting Prudence to inspect its immaculate surface. She bent down, staring at it. Alfred kissed the nape of her neck. As he did so, he sprang sharply to attention, and so did the maid. She moved swiftly and silently to the fireplace.

Sir Geoffrey Pomfret entered.

He belonged to a type of country gentleman now almost extinct. His round, rosy, clean-shaven face suggested John Bull. To accentuate this resemblance he wore breeches and gaiters, very well cut, a rough shooting-coat, a canary waistcoat and a bright bird's-eye blue cravat. Every movement and word proclaimed the autocrat. He advanced a couple of steps, glanced about him with a genial smile, and addressed the obsequious Alfred.

"Where's Mr. Fishpingle?"

"In stable-yard, I think, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire crossed to the chimney-piece, eyeing Prudence with much approval. He said pleasantly:

"Don't let me disturb you, my dear. Bless me! Your skirts have come down and your hair's gone up."

Prudence curtsied.

"If you please, Sir Geoffrey."

"Well, well, the flight of Time does not please me. How's your good mother, Prudence?"

"Very nicely, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire nodded his massive head.

"Healthy family, you Rockleys. Most of my people, thank the Lord! are healthy." Alfred grinned acquiescence. "What the doose are you grinnin' at?"

"I beg pardon, Sir Geoffrey."

"I like grins. A good grin is worth money to any young man. Speak up, sir! Always share a joke with a friend. I hope, b' Jove! you regard me as a friend?"

Man and maid answered simultaneously:

"Oh yes, Sir Geoffrey."

"Certainly, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire squared his broad shoulders and laughed.

"Then out with it, Alfred."

Alfred, thus encouraged, and sensible that he was appearing to advantage in the eyes of Prudence, said boldly:

"I was remembering, Sir Geoffrey, what you was sayin' las' night about they eugannicks."

The Squire laughed again.

"Took it all in, did you?" Alfred bobbed. "Capital! If I had my way eugenics should be taught in every school in the kingdom." He spoke to Alfred, but he looked kindly at Prudence.

"If you please, sir——"

"Yes, my pretty maid?"

"What are—eugannicks?"

Sir Geoffrey hesitated and coughed, but he

was not the man to crane long at an awkward fence.

"Well, well, how can I put it plainly to an intelligent child?"

"I be nineteen, Sir Geoffrey, come Michaelmas."

"And my god-daughter, b' Jove!"

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey."

She curtsied again. The question had been asked and answered many times. The Squire was now at his best—"in touch," as he put it, with his own people. He stroked an ample chin.

"I have sixteen god-daughters in Nether Applewhite, and the welfare of all of 'em is near and dear to my heart. Nineteen, are yer?" He surveyed her critically. "And one of ten, too?" She smiled. "All alive and doin' well?" Prudence nodded; the Squire rubbed his hands together. "Capital! The crop that never fails. How many in your family, Alfred?"

"Seven, Sir Geoffrey. No—eight."

Alfred grinned deprecatingly.

Instantly the Squire's voice grew testy.

"What d'ye mean, sir, by your 'seven, no eight'?"

"I forgot my twin brother, Sir Geoffrey, him as died afore I was christened. I was only a lil' baby at the time."

"Yes, yes, I remember. Sad affair. Diphtheria. Cost me a pretty penny. Drains—damn 'em."

For a moment silence imposed itself, broken by the soft, coaxing voice of Prudence.

"And—eugannicks, Sir Geoffrey?"

The Squire pulled himself together, inflating his chest, astride a favourite hobby. He began glibly enough:

"Drains, my girl, are a vital part of eugenics, but it begins—it begins—— Um! It's not easy to make myself perfectly plain to a young girl."

Alfred grinned again, Prudence said reflectively:

"That's what Alferd said, Sir Geoffrey."

Alfred's grin vanished as the Squire's keen eyes rested upon him.

"Bless my soul! Have you been discussing eugenics with my god-daughter?"

Alfred moved uneasily.

"She did ask for information, Sir Geoffrey; and I made so bold as to refer her to Mr. Fishpingle."

The Squire's face indicated relief.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Fishpingle will explain. Dear me! Is that the William and Mary tankard?"

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey."

"What the doose is it doin' there—upside down?"

"Mr. Fishpingle'll explain that, Sir Geoffrey. His very particular orders. I—I think I hear him coming, Sir Geoffrey."

Prudence began dusting again as Fishpingle came into the room. He was a slightly older man than the Squire and bore his years less lightly. He was something of the Squire's

build, a fine figure of a man—so the women said—and he bore upon a thinner, more refined face, the same look of authority. As soon as he saw his master he smiled delightfully. Sir Geoffrey growled out:

"You ought to be a policeman, Ben."

"A policeman, Sir Geoffrey?"

"You're never about when you're most particularly wanted. Have you looked at the mare?"

Fishpingle answered easily with the respectful assurance of an old servant who had gone rabbiting with his master when they were boys together.

"You won't ride her again this season, Sir Geoffrey. She never was quite up to your weight, and this spring hunting on hard ground is cruel work on the hocks. She'll have to be fired, the pretty dear."

"Turn her out into the water-meadows."

"Very good, sir."

"And now, pray tell me, what is the meaning of—that?"

He indicated the tankard. Fishpingle smiled.

"A small matter of discipline, Sir Geoffrey, which concerns Alfred and myself."

"But why, man, is it placed upside down?"

"Merely as an object lesson, to test a young man's powers of observation."

As he spoke, with a certain quaint deliberation, he glanced affectionately at the fine piece

of silver. Then, in a sharper tone, he spoke to Alfred :

"Take it away, my lad, and clean it properly."

Alfred picked up the tankard, somewhat sullenly. His face brightened as the Squire exclaimed irritably :

"But, damn it, Ben, the tankard is clean. Here—give it me."

Alfred handed over the tankard, which the Squire examined carefully.

"Nothing wrong that I can see."

Alfred betrayed a momentary triumph. Fishpingle said quietly :

"Please inspect the bottom of it, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire did so, and chuckled.

"Yes, yes, I take you, Ben. Inculcate your object lesson, my friend."

Fishpingle obeyed this injunction in his own deliberate fashion. Perhaps this was the essential difference between two men who had so much else in common. The Squire, obviously, acted upon impulse. Inheriting a large estate early in life, and with it those *droits de seigneur* which, to do him credit, he had exercised both leniently and with an honest regard for the feelings of others, he had learned to control everybody upon his domain except himself. Fishpingle, on the other hand, with a much stronger will and an intelligence far above the average, habitually looked before he leaped. Having done so he was quite likely to leap

farther than his master. He took the tankard from Sir Geoffrey's hand, and slowly tapped the bottom of it.

"Hall marks full of plate powder. A guest sees this fine tankard on Sir Geoffrey's dining-table. If he is a connoisseur he asks leave to look it over. And the one thing which gives him the information he's after—*pedigree*—has been hidden by your carelessness. Off with you!"

Alfred, much crestfallen, took the tankard and left the room. Sir Geoffery sat down in Fishpingle's big armchair. He smiled pleasantly at Prudence.

"Run along, my little maid," he said, in his most genial voice.

Prudence hesitated, fiddling with her apron.

"What is it, my dear?"

She blushed a little.

"Eugannicks, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire threw back his head and laughed.

"Ha—ha! What a nose for a hunted fox!"

Prudence, thus compared to a hound, had wit enough to "speak" to a good scent.

"If it ought to be taught in the schools——"

The Squire was delighted. As a rule, the stupidity of some of his people exasperated him.

"You sly little puss! I say, Ben——"

"Sir Geoffrey?"

"Your little niece wants to know the meaning of eugenics."

"Please, uncle."

Fishpingle glanced from the beaming face of

the Squire to the demure Prudence standing at attention between them. The light from the big window fell full upon her trim, graciously rounded figure. Here, indeed, was the concrete presentment of what eugenics might achieve. A faint smile flickered about his lips; his eyes softened. As a matter of fact, Prudence was not his niece, but a cousin, a first cousin once removed. But he gazed at her with the proud and affectionate glance of a father. Then he said slowly:

"Eugenics, Prudence, is the new science which deals with conditions which make for the improvement of the human race."

The Squire nodded complacently.

"Couldn't have put it better myself, b' Jove!"

Fishpingle bowed.

"That is exactly what you said last night, Sir Geoffrey, to her ladyship."

"So I did—so I did. But my lady failed to understand me."

"I don't understand neither," murmured Prudence.

"Have another go, Ben," the Squire enjoined.

Fishpingle took his time, choosing his words carefully.

"You are a strong healthy girl, Prudence."

"Aye—that I be, thank the Lard!"

Sir Geoffrey was not the man to let pass such an opportunity. It may be mentioned here that he had made sacrifices for his people, amongst which may be counted the giving up of

a town house, foreign travel, and the riding of less expensive hunters not quite up to his weight. He said gravely:

"You can thank me, too, Prudence. The sanitary condition of Nether-Applewhite put that fine colour into your cheeks, my girl." Prudence curtsied. "Go on, Ben. Forrard away!"

If the Squire was swift to grasp his opportunities, as much and more could be said of Fishpingle. He had reason to believe that love passages had taken place between Alfred and Prudence, and a marriage between these young people would be, in his opinion, the real right thing. Would the Squire encourage such a match?

"Alfred," he said, looking at the Squire as he spoke, "is also a fine specimen of what a young man ought to be. And a marriage between you two young persons would be, from the point of view of eugenics——"

"Disastrous!"

Sir Geoffrey, sitting bolt upright, snapped out the adjective.

"Oh-h-h!" exclaimed Prudence. Fishpingle was surprised also.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Geoffrey?"

"They are first cousins, man. Had you forgotten that?"

Prudence interrupted hastily.

"Father an' mother was second cousins."

"Were they, b' Jove! That makes the matter ten times worse."

"But—why?" Prudence insisted.

Sir Geoffrey, fairly cornered, growled out:

"You explain, Ben."

"Not now, Sir Geoffrey, if you please. Later."

"Yes, yes; you can leave us, Prudence."

The maid went out quickly. As the door closed behind her a gulp was heard. The Squire frowned.

"Ben?"

"Sir Geoffrey?"

"That little dear was upset."

"Young females are subject to flustrations."

"Shush-h! She wouldn't listen at the door, would she?"

"My niece—eavesdropping?"

"She ain't your niece, if it comes to that. And the best of 'em do it. Why was the child upset?"

Fishpingle answered directly.

"Because Alfred and she hope to get married."

The Squire exploded, shaking a minatory forefinger at his butler.

"You knew this? And not a word to me? Tchah!"

The resentful sparkle in the Squire's eyes might have been detected also in the eyes of Fishpingle, but there was no irritability in his tone as he said respectfully:

"I hav'n't had a word from them yet, Sir Geoffrey, but I guessed what was up."

"Well, well, I count on you to nip this. It must be nipped—nipped."

He stood up. Fishpingle remained silent. In a louder voice, with a peremptory gesture, Sir Geoffrey continued:

"Did you hear me, Ben? I said—*nipped*. No in-and-in breeding on my property."

Fishpingle observed blandly:

"It worked well enough with the Suffolk punches and the hounds you had from the Duke of Badminton."

"Damn you, Ben, it is just like your impudence to argue with me. Now—I leave this little matter in your hands. Have you seen that fool Bonsor this morning?"

Bonsor was the bailiff and a source of chronic irritation to his employer. Fishpingle had seen him and spoken to him about some ailing sheep. The Squire listened, frowning and nodding his head. When Fishpingle had finished, he burst out irrelevantly:

"Don't forget what I said just now. You share my views about breedin'. All you know you've got from me, you ungrateful old dog!"

"I owe much to your family, Sir Geoffrey."

"Pay your debts. There are moments, Ben, when you disappoint me. When you try to—a—*down* me with my own carefully digested arguments. You're a match-makin' old woman, you are. You've encouraged Prudence to become engaged to her double first cousin."

Fishpingle smiled disarmingly.

"Double first cousins, Sir Geoffrey, if you'll pardon me, are the children, let us say, of two

brothers who happen to have married two sisters."

The Squire fumed, tapping his gaiters with the riding switch which he carried.

"There you go again! Trying to crow over me with knowledge gleaned, b' Jove! from me. You tell Prudence to find another young man." He stumped to the door and opened it. "You make that perfectly plain to the little baggage. I'm counting on her for half a dozen healthy kids at the least. You hear me? That's the irreducible minimum."

"I'll make a mental note of it, Sir Geoffrey."

Sir Geoffrey relaxed a little.

"I'm sorry if I've made you lose your temper, Ben."

"Pray don't mention it, Sir Geoffrey."

"And if Bonsor comes bobbing round again about those damned sheep, tell him what you think—I mean what I think."

He went out, slamming the door. Fishpingle whistled softly to himself.

CHAPTER II

FISHPINGLE sat down to his desk and busied himself with some papers. He thought it likely that Prudence might return, but she didn't. The butler lit a pipe, rose from his chair, and crossed to the fireplace. Upon the mantel-shelf, framed alike in handsome leather frames, stood three photographs—Sir Geoffrey, in hunting kit, which became him admirably, Lady Pomfret, and Lionel Pomfret in the uniform of the Rifle Brigade. Fishpingle gazed intently at the portrait of his mistress. It happened to be an admirable likeness, recently taken. Fishpingle's face softened, as he murmured something to himself. Perhaps he was thinking that here indeed was that rare bird—a lady of quality, the porcelain clay of human kind. The gracious curves of face and person, the kind, thoughtful eyes, heavily lidded, the sweet mouth, the delicately-cut nose—all these attributes indicated race. One glance at such a portrait would inform any observer that Sir Geoffrey had been fortunate in his choice of a wife. And the same observer might have hazarded the conjecture that the lady was well content with her husband and life. Obviously, too, that life had been sheltered,

lavender-scented, fragrant with all odours of woods and fields, untainted by what is offensive and cruel and urban.

"Bless her!" ejaculated Fishpingle.

He turned to the portrait of her son, a smiling stripling, who had inherited the delicate features of his mother, and, apparently, none of his father's rugged health and massive physique. Fishpingle frowned a little. But he smiled again when he glanced at the Squire's bluff, jolly face. Meanwhile his pipe had gone out. He relit it, walked to the door, called for Alfred, at work in the pantry, and then sat down in the big armchair.

Alfred's voice was heard humming a tune. He stopped humming as he came in.

"Sit down," said Fishpingle.

Alfred, rather surprised, perched himself upon the edge of a chair. Fishpingle puffed at his pipe. After a moment or two, he removed it from his lips, saying abruptly:

"So you want to marry Prudence?"

Alfred betrayed astonishment.

"The lil' besom told 'ee?"

Fishpingle shook his head.

"How did 'ee find out?"

"Never mind that! The powers of observation, my lad, so singularly lacking in you, are sharpened to a finer edge in me."

In dealing with his subordinates, Fishpingle's copious vocabulary and choice of English never failed to astonish and confound. It was known, of course, that he had been educated above his

station because his mother had been the favourite maid of Sir Geoffrey's grandmother, and later he had served as valet to his present master. But even these well-established facts were inadequate to the bucolic intelligence. A spice of mystery remained. Fishpingle ended on a sharper note:

"You want her?"

Alfred leant forward, speaking very emphatically:

"Aye—that I do. She be the sweetest lil' maid in Wiltsheer, she be."

"Um! And Prudence wants you, hey?"

Alfred grinned. Beneath the crust of an upper-servant's manner, he caught a glimpse of that rare and refreshing fruit—sympathy. And he was well aware of the butler's affection for his kinswoman.

"Ah-h-h! When she were a settin' on my knee las' night, with her dinky arms roun' my neck, and her lil' mouth——"

"That will do," said Fishpingle, drily. "Obviously, the maid wants you. Now, let me see—your grandfather lived to a ripe old age, didn't he?"

Alfred nodded eagerly.

"Granfer, he live to be a hunderd an' two. Yas, he did. An' he could carry more ale, an' mead, an' cider, wi'out showing it, than any man in Nether Applewhite. An' smokin' like a chimbley all the time. A most wonnerful man was granfer."

Fishpingle pursed up his lips, judicially, and his tone became magisterial.

"But your father is dead, Alfred. What killed him?"

Alfred laughed incredulously. Let it not be imputed to him for heartlessness.

"You ain't never forgotten how pore dear father died. Mother killed un."

"Nonsense, my lad."

"'Tis true as true. Mother, pore soul, she put carbolic acid in an ale bottle. Father—you mind he was Sir Geoffrey's shepherd?" Fishpingle inclined his head. "Well, he come home-along tarr'ble thirsty, an', dang me! if he didn't take a swig out o' ale-bottle. Doctor said 'twould have killed any other man in two jiffs, but father he lived two hours in most tarr'ble agony. 'Twas a very sad mishap."

Alfred sniffed, overcome by his emotions. Fishpingle nodded.

"I'm sorry, my boy. My memory is not quite what it was. Well, it seems that Prudence wants you and that you want her."

Alfred smiled again. He began to plead his case excitedly.

"I've money in bank, I have. And strong arms to work and fend for her. God A'mighty knows I be fair achin' for her. I earns good wages I do. And when you retire, sir, I be countin' on steppin' into your shoes."

"You'll never quite fill them."

"That be sober truth. I've a dinky lil' foot I have."

"You can go."

Alfred jumped up.

"Then it be right and tight seemin'ly?"

Fishpingle looked at him.

"Suppose Sir Geoffrey objected?"

Alfred laughed gaily.

"You can get round un. We all knows that. 'Tis the common sayin' that you be lard o' the manor o' Nether-Applewhite in all but name."

"Off with you!"

Alfred burst into song.

> "And now I'll marry my own pretty maid,
> So handsome, and so cle—ver!"

Fishpingle held up his hand.

"Don't sing! And—not a word of this to Prudence till I've spoken to her."

Alfred nodded and withdrew.

Alone, once more, Fishpingle moved restlessly about the room. He was sensible of some premonition of trouble, some lurking doubt of his power to smooth the path of these simple lovers, some fear that interference on his part might be obstinately resented. Work might have distracted him, but for the moment there was not work enough for two able-bodied footmen, not to mention the odd man, who laboured more abundantly than them all.

He sat down at the Sheraton bureau, and took from a drawer a much battered tin box, which he opened with a small key attached to his watch chain. The box held some letters and a miniature. In his less robust moments, when any really pressing appeal happened to be made to his sentimental side, a side carefully hidden from Nether-Applewhite, Fishpingle was

in the habit of opening this box, and looking at the miniature. He might, if the necessity were really importunate, read a letter or two. He had picked up the miniature when a tap at the door was heard.

"Come in."

Prudence appeared. Fishpingle was not deceived by her self-composed and almost valiant deportment. He knew that she had missed "elevenses" and had spent at least a quarter of an hour crying in her room, and as much time again in repairing the ravages wrought by tears. As he was expecting her, and didn't wish her to know it, he expressed a mild surprise.

"Is everybody as idle as I am in this house?"

She perched herself upon his knee, put one arm round his neck, and kissed his forehead.

"Dear Uncle Ben," she cooed.

"Cupboard love, my dear. I know why you are here. I know what you want—Alfred."

"What a man you be!"

"Don't you want him? Speak up!"

She put her lips to his ear and whispered.

"Yes, I do. There!"

"And you came here to tell me this?"

"N—no."

"Then why did you come?"

"Because of what Sir Geoffrey said. What did he mean? What *did* he mean?"

Fishpingle felt her cheek rubbed softly against his. The little witch meant to abuse

her powers. And her sweetness, the artlessness of her avowal, were irresistible. Indecision took to its heels. Then and there he registered a vow to fight on the lovers' side, to fight, if need be, to a finish. He said tentatively:

"About eugenics?"

She slipped from his knee, fetched a footstool, and sat down upon it, clasping his hand in hers.

"Tell about eugannicks, Uncle Ben."

For the second time that morning he noticed that the maid was in sunlight, whereas he sat in shadow. And her voice, eager, youthful, vibrant with feeling, seemed to ring out of the sunlight, whereas his own grave inflections floated quietly out of the shadowy past.

"It would come better from your mother, Prue."

"Mother be manglin' to-day. 'Tis easier to talk to 'ee than her, so busy she be from marnin' till night. An' I brought my troubles to 'ee, Uncle Ben, when I was a lil' maid. Squire said that a marriage 'atween cousins 'd be dis—*astrous*. If he were talkin' eugannicks, why then I hate an' despise eugannicks—yas, I do."

"He was talking eugenics. Sir Geoffrey is a great gentleman, Prue. There are not many left like him. He lives on his own land, he spends all his money amongst his own people."

Prudence said sharply:

"Squire ain't too much to spend, seemin'ly."

"True enough. He's land poor. It's been a struggle ever since I can remember. And

I've been here all my life. And I know Squire better—better than he knows himself."

Prudence observed more cheerfully:

"We all says that."

He pressed her hand. She divined somehow that he was speaking with difficulty, speaking rather to himself than to her, conjuring up a picture which she beheld but dimly.

"You are little more than a child, but have you ever thought of what it means when two persons live together and work together for fifty years?"

"I have thought o' that lately, Uncle Ben."

"Eugenics begin there, my maid. Two persons living together and working together, not entirely for themselves but for others. Now, Prue, have you thought of the others?"

"What others?" she whispered.

"Your—children."

"Ye—es. But I hope there won't be too many o' they, uncle."

"Mind your grammar. You speak well enough before the quality. Now, child, I've broken the ice for a modest maid. Eugenics mean care and thought for those who come after us. Sir Geoffrey looks upon all of you as his children. He gave up the hounds to build more cottages. He takes a real interest in every colt and lamb and calf and child born in Nether-Applewhite."

Prudence considered this, with her head on one side.

"He must get fair dazed and mazed, pore man," she declared.

"Occasionally he does. Look at me, Prue."

She lifted her clear eyes to his, listening attentively as he went on—

"Rightly or wrongly, Sir Geoffrey dislikes marriages between folk who are near of kin."

Prudence pouted.

"'Tis right and proper that a maid may not marry her granfer, but cousins——"

Fishpingle tried to explain that any taint, any predisposition to disease, is likely to come out with greater virulence in the children of those persons who are of kin. Prudence, however, remained unconvinced. She jumped up and stood proudly before him.

"But, Uncle Ben, we be strong and hearty as never was, me and Alfie."

"If I can make that clear to Sir Geoffrey——"

"To be sure you can, and you will."

To her amazement and distress his tone, as he answered her, sounded unconvincing and troubled.

"Perhaps. I—I hope so. He can be very—obstinate."

"You be more obstinate than he."

Tears formed in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. Fishpingle was not proof against this. Suddenly she flung herself into his arms sobbing passionately. Between her sobs he could hear a strangled voice repeating miserably

"I can't live without Alfie, no, I can't."

He stroked her head till she grew calmer.

He was wondering, not for the first time, at the force of love, its violence in primitive natures, its effect upon such an artless maid as this, and lastly the danger involved in thwarting and diverting from its normal channel so devastating a stream. And the resolution to help this confiding, helpless creature gathered increasing will-power and direction. When she grew calmer, he said softly:

"You can't live without Alfred? Come, come, I have lived all these years without a wife."

As he spoke, he was sensible that an older, more experienced woman might have turned upon him fiercely, asking him if such an abstention, whether voluntary or forced, was to be commended. And when Prudence left his encircling arm and lifted widely-opened eyes to his, he almost winced before their mute interrogation. But the maid only murmured gently:

"That be true. Uncle Ben, dear, whatever made 'ee stay single? Do tell!"

Should he speak or hold his peace? Her violence had affected him most strangely, broken down barriers of silence, self-imposed. The wish to speak gripped him. And the right word at such a moment might be a warning now and a solace hereafter if—if his plans went agley. He said very quietly:

"My Christian name is Benoni."

Prudence observed promptly—

"Benoni, so mother tell me, come slam-bang out o' the Holy Book."

"Yes. Did your mother tell you what Benoni means?" She shook her head. "It means in Hebrew—a son of sorrow."

She stared at him, trying to interpret a new and strange kinsman. Pity informed her face, and then she smiled, recalling the old and familiar Uncle Ben.

"But you bain't sorrowful, dear heart."

"I hope not. I count myself, Prue, a happy man. But sorrow brought me into the world, sorrow brought me to Nether Applewhite."

As her imagination grappled with this calm statement, Fishpingle sat down. She knelt beside him, forgetting her own troubles as she gazed anxiously into his kind face.

"Surely your mother has given you some—hint?"

Prudence affirmed positively that this was not the case. She added proudly that her mother was no talker; one who kept herself to herself as became a respectable mother of ten. Fishpingle continued:

"Your grandmother was my mother's sister."

"I know that."

"My mother was the prettiest maid in Nether-Applewhite; clever, too, quick with her tongue, as you are—and quick with her needle, as you aren't."

"Now, Uncle Ben!"

His voice lost its more familiar intonations and became impersonal and dreamy.

"She became lady's maid to Sir Geoffrey's grandmother, Lady Alicia Pomfret. She went

about with her everywhere. She ran away with my father. And when I was born she—died."

Prudence shivered.

"Oh, dear! You never saw your own mother?"

He picked up the miniature.

"This, child, is her portrait."

Prudence looked at it and kissed it.

"Thank you, Prue," said Fishpingle. He took the miniature from her and placed it with the letters in the tin box.

"Before my mother died, she sent for Lady Alicia, her old mistress. Her ladyship took charge of me and brought me here."

"But your father, Uncle Ben? Didn't he want you?"

"He was not his own master. He married again later on. A small provision was made for me, not much. That is all. What I have told you is between our two selves. Promise?"

"I promise and vow! But why didn't you marry? A man must love somebody."

"I have loved Sir Geoffrey, Master Lionel, her ladyship and you."

He kissed her tenderly, and she rose to her feet. In his ordinary tone he said:

"Be off to your work. If Mrs. Randall asks any questions, you can say that I had need of you."

She hesitated.

"I have need of you, Uncle Ben. I shan't eat nor sleep unless you tell me that I shall get Alfie."

"Sir Geoffrey instructed me just now to tell you something very different. You are to find another young man."

Her face fell dolorously. Fishpingle's eyes twinkled, and his square chin obtruded itself.

"But I tell you, Prudence, to do nothing of the sort."

She laughed.

"I shall obey you, uncle."

Like Alfred, she burst into song as she flitted down the corridor.

Fishpingle locked the tin box and put it away. Then he saw to it that Alfred and the second footman, a singularly raw youth, were diligently at work in the pantry. The second footman had been taken, so to speak, from the plough-tail because Sir Geoffrey had stood sponsor for him, and it was an idosyncrasy of the Squire's to keep an eye upon his god-children, rather to the disgust of Fishpingle, who set an inordinate value upon old plate, and much to the amusement of Lady Pomfret. Having rated the second footman soundly, Fishpingle went into the dining-room, where a small table in the big oriel window was laid for two. Upon the walls hung portraits of dead and gone Pomfrets, and in the centre of the room stood the great mahogany table at which many of them had made merry. Fishpingle frowned as his eyes rested upon the portrait of Sir Guy Pomfret, the present baronet's grandfather, a gentleman of fashion, who had played skittles

with a fine fortune. Beside him, painted by the same artist, hung the portrait of Lady Alicia, his kind friend and protector. He owed his education to this stately dame, and much else beside. Fishpingle smiled pleasantly at her.

Having satisfied himself that the luncheon table was in order, he opened one of the casement windows and gazed placidly at the park, which sloped with charming undulations to the Avon. His glance lingered with affection upon the ancient yews thriving amazingly upon a thin, chalky soil. They had been here before the Pomfrets! There was a particular yew in Nether Applewhite churchyard mentioned in Doomsday Book. Out of some of these yews had been fashioned the bows of Crécy and Agincourt.

He wondered whether the old order of landed gentry were doomed. The parson, Mr. Hamlin, a bit of a Radical, held iconoclastic views. According to this reverend gentleman, who much enjoyed an argument, great estates, and in particular those which suffered from lack of ready money, would share the fate of similar properties in France, and be duly apportioned amongst a triumphant democracy to the betterment of the majority. Fishpingle loathed such a possibility, the more so because the parson's arguments were hard nuts to crack. Such a man, upon such an estate, provoked surprise and exasperation. Fishpingle knew that he had been offered the living because he was famous as a cricketer. The Squire believed in muscular

Christianity. After the irreparable event came the soul-shattering discovery that the parson supported Mr. Gladstone. A three acres and a cow fellow!

A May sun illumined the landscape. The dining-room faced due east, and to the west, beyond the woods which fringed the park, stretched the New Forest. Sir Geoffrey hunted with both fox-hounds and buck-hounds, and Fishpingle could well remember the days, not long passed, when the house at this spring season was hospitably full of "thrusters" from the shires, keen to kill a May fox in the most beautiful woodlands in England. Economy prohibited such lavish entertainment now that rents were falling with the price of corn and the rate of living steadily rising.

A soft voice put to flight these reflections.

"Ah, Ben, I thought I should find you here."

Fishpingle turned hastily to behold his mistress smiling at him.

Fishpingle never looked at her without reflecting that no artist could possibly do her justice. Others, but no better judges, shared this conviction. A delicate bisque figure, moulded by Spengler, would lose its charm if painted. Lady Pomfret suggested the finest bisque, and yet colour radiated from her, those soft tints which seem to defy reproduction. She was past fifty, matronly in person, but youth remained, an inalienable possession. The consciousness that she was beloved may have kept ardent this dancing flame, for love is the supreme

beauty doctor. To this great gift some fairy godmother had added a lively sense of humour constantly exercised by the wife of Sir Geoffrey. And, in every way, she was his happy complement. He believed, honest fellow, that he ruled his wife. Fishpingle knew that he became as wax beneath her slender, pliable fingers. Long ago, she had accepted his disabilities as part and parcel of the man she loved. His quick temper, his prejudices and predilections growing stronger with advancing years, his too hasty conclusions and judgments endeared the Squire to her. And she knew that he adored her, had remained the gallant lover of her girlhood, prodigal in attentions which delight women. Invariably he saw her to her carriage; he rose when she entered a room; he brought her flowers and such simple oblations; he paid her compliments. He exacted from others the respect which he rendered so spontaneously to her.

Lady Pomfret approached Fishpingle and said confidentially:

"The Squire is upset this morning."

Fishpingle, slyly aware that this was the thin end of the wedge, and that Sir Geoffrey had attempted to enlist his wife upon his side and against the lovers, assigned to the Squire's discomposure what he knew to be the wrong reason.

"I told him the mare was not up to his weight."

"That distressed him; it wasn't that."

"Might have been the sheep, my lady."

"It might have been, but it wasn't. I think, Ben, that you are well aware of the real reason. Now, why have you made this match?"

Fishpingle made a gesture of repudiation. Lady Pomfret laughed.

"I can guess that Nature was the match-maker, not you. It is unfortunate that they are cousins."

"Why so, my lady? There is no danger in such matches, where the strain on both sides is clean and sound. That is Sir Geoffrey's own view."

Lady Pomfret held up a protesting finger.

"My dear Ben, I cannot talk eugenics with you, because I should be confounded by your superior knowledge. What I want to ask you is this: are the young people deeply attached to each other, or is it a mere passing flirtation?"

He answered her positively.

"They are deeply attached, my lady. I can assure you that it is no passing fancy, but the real thing."

"Does an old crusty bachelor flatter himself that he knows the real thing?"

"He does, my lady."

Lady Pomfret laughed gaily. The freedom and familiarity of her intercourse with this faithful servant were the greater because she knew that he was incapable of abusing his privileges.

"Ben," she continued, "I am quite sure that your fighting instincts have been aroused. Don't

shake your head! I know you, and you know me. The Squire is thinking of sending Alfred away, but I ventured to point out to him that he was a most excellent servant, who understood our ways, and that poor Charles, his godson"—she chuckled—"was hardly ready for promotion. That gave him pause. Now I suggest to you the propriety of marking time. Youth can wait, and so can Age. This tempest in our teapot will blow over. And—strictly between ourselves—we must give undivided attention to a match which more seriously concerns the fortunes of our family."

Fishpingle became alert instantly.

"Master Lionel is coming home," he exclaimed. "That is great news, my lady, wonderful news."

"We don't know for certain, Ben. It is probable. And then——!"

"And then?"

She recovered her sprightliness, which had vanished at mention of her son. He was with his regiment in India. He had exchanged from an English battalion because his lungs were none too strong. The dreadful word was never spoken, but Fishpingle knew that a slight but unmistakable tendency to consumption had manifested itself. There was reason to believe that the young fellow had grown more robust in the Punjab. But the taint, the predisposition, had been inherited from his mother's family, the Belwethers.

Lady Pomfret's eyes twinkled.

"He has not been allured by any girl in India. I have his positive assurance on that."

Fishpingle made no reply. He was wondering whether his mistress could assign a reason for this indifference, a reason divined rather than known to himself. From the guileless expression of her face, he could draw no inference save this: that she was less guileless, where her own flesh and blood might be concerned, than she appeared. He waited patiently for further enlightenment. He perceived, moreover, that Lady Pomfret was in a rarely expansive mood.

"If we could pick and choose for him!"

"Ah!"

"Money is sadly needed, Ben."

Each sighed, thinking of necessary things left undone—sterile acres that cried aloud for fertilisers; farm-buildings falling into disrepair; grumbling tenants; the long, dreary catalogue of "wants" upon an impoverished estate.

"You have great influence with the Squire, Ben."

She spoke with significance. Fishpingle smiled. The dear lady had sought him with a definite object in view, which she would reveal after her own fashion. In this case, it was revealed sooner than she had intended, for she "gave herself away" by allowing her eyes to linger upon the finest picture in the dining-room, a magnificent Sir Joshua, a full-length portrait of a Pomfret beauty. At once Fishpingle stiffened and became impassive.

"You don't approve?"

Her feminine quickness of apprehension on such occasions as these always disconcerted him. He realised that he, in his turn, had "given himself away."

"Sell that? Never, my lady."

She shrugged her shoulders, regarding him ironically, reflecting with ever-increasing amazement that long service with the Pomfrets had positively turned him into a Pomfret, that he had become blind, like his master, to what was so crystal clear to her—the necessity of sacrifice, of lopping off superabundant growth to save a splendid tree.

"It is worth twenty thousand pounds, Ben."

He remained silent. Undismayed, she tried again.

"That outlying strip of building property, eh? Would it be missed?"

Fishpingle grunted. It was futile to discuss such matters with a Belwether. Everybody knew that their estates had melted away by just such a process of constant disintegration. He said vehemently:

"Your ladyship knows that the most valuable pictures are heirlooms."

"That could be got over with Master Lionel's consent."

So, she had taken expert opinion! A sweet lady, but a crafty.

"All the land is strictly entailed."

"So you have told me before, but that, too, could be arranged, if the necessity of breaking the entailment were made plain."

Fishpingle let himself go. To the amusement of his mistress, he became for the moment the Squire, using the Squire's familiar gestures, taking words often in his mouth.

"My lady, Sir Geoffrey may be right about this, or he may be wrong, but what he inherited from his father cannot be sold. He will pass it on to his son. That is part of his religion."

"And yours?"

The sharp question, so quietly spoken, took him aback. She continued quickly:

"You feel as he does about this supremely important matter, but why—why? That is a mystery to me. I can understand his feelings about his own property, not yours. Have you no sense of detachment, Ben? Can you not see, as I see, the issues involved?"

Her voice faltered. Fishpingle became acutely distressed. He said entreatingly:

"My lady, I would do anything, anything, to serve you and yours, but not this one thing. It would mean the beginning of the end. Every Pomfret before Sir Guy added to this property till it became what it is. You know that the Squire would give his right hand if he, too, would carry on the family tradition and buy, not sell. As for the issues involved, I think I see them plainly. Sir Geoffrey sees them. He does not shrink from them. Nor do you, I know."

"Ah! you don't quite know, but go on."

"Expenses must be cut down. Economy in management, better organisation and better prices, which must come, will pull us through."

She retorted sombrely:

"Better prices may not come, and my son is coming home."

"Master Lionel, my lady, will think as his father thinks."

"Ben, you make things hard for me."

She sat down, folding her hands upon her lap. Her expression indicated resignation, feminine weakness. Fishpingle was not deceived. The battle was not over, but beginning. Her ladyship had cleared her decks for action.

"I can't quite follow you, my lady."

"You will in a moment," her tone brightened. Outside, she could hear Sir Geoffrey rating a retriever. That meant freedom from interruption. In five minutes the faithful Ben would be enlightened. She asked him to sit down. He did so with a premonition of defeat.

"Has it occurred to you, my dear old friend, that the simplest solution of our problem might be found if Lionel married money?"

Fishpingle flushed a little. The delicate flattery of leaving out the formal prefix to her son's name, the tacit assurance that she suspended for a moment the difficult relationship between mistress and man, produced its intended effect.

"I have often thought of it, my lady."

"Then you will admit that Lionel is placed in a false position?"

Fishpingle winced. She had pierced, at the first thrust, the joint in his armour.

"He might be," he admitted.

"He is in it already. God forbid that direct pressure should be used. The Squire is incapable of that. Because we should not use such pressure, the dear fellow might apply it himself. And if—if, Ben, he happened to fall in love with a charming, penniless girl—— "

Her voice died away. Fishpingle tried to read her thoughts and failed helplessly. Did she suspect that there was such an attachment already? After a pause she went on :

"That would be a great trial and disappointment to his father."

Fishpingle opened his mouth and closed it.

"You know that, Ben, as well as I do. There are many nice girls with money. Sir Geoffrey, poor dear man, is picking and choosing half a dozen such, but our son can be trusted to make his own choice."

"Yes," said Fishpingle.

"If you had to choose, Ben, between the selling of that Reynolds and the building land *and* Lionel's future happiness would you hesitate a moment?"

"Not a moment, my lady."

"I was quite sure of that."

She rose, smiling placidly. Fishpingle rose with her. Nothing more was to be said. The conqueror held out her hand.

"You are a true friend, Ben, loyal and—discreet."

With that Parthian shot, she went her way.

CHAPTER III

NETHER-APPLEWHITE Vicarage, which adjoined the small church, lay snugly within the park, less than half a mile from Pomfret Court. Below it was the village through which flowed the placid Avon. In the days of Mr. Hamlin's predecessor, a cadet of the Pomfret family, the proximity of vicarage to hall had been regarded as an advantage. The Squire shot and hunted with his parson, who was assuredly not the worse parson for being a sportsman, and each strolled in and out of the other's house half a dozen times a week. This pleasant and profitable intercourse lasted till the death of the parson. It has been said that Mr. Hamlin was a Radical, but in justice to the Squire it must be added that political differences might easily have been overcome, inasmuch as Sir Geoffrey disliked all politicians, and, although a staunch supporter of the Conservative Association in his Division, confessed handsomely that political arguments bored him to tears. And when his old friend and kinsmen passed away, he had sought diligently for his successor and believed fondly that he had found him. Even now, after fifteen years of bickering and increasing estrangement,

Sir Geoffrey would have admitted frankly that Hamlin had justified his selection. He was a hard worker and popular—perhaps a shade too popular—in a large straggling parish. More, he preached short rousing sermons which concerned themselves more with conduct than dogma. Since his incumbency, there had been less drunkenness, obscenity, and scandal-mongering. Indeed, in weightier matters, the Squire and he saw eye to eye. They differed hopelessly about non-essentials. Hamlin, a High Churchman, had introduced certain harmless practices, genuflections and the like, into the Ritual. Lady Pomfret was amused at these antics upon the part of a big fellow who could hit a cricket ball for six. Not so the Squire. He rocked with rage. Finally, he rose from his knees, and stumped out of church. A letter was despatched, worded not too temperately. Mr. Hamlin became less acrobatic in front of the altar. The Squire realised that he had behaved hastily. The two men might have become friends after this regrettable incident had the rabbits on the estate been less prolific. As a matter of fact, they increased and multiplied against the particular orders of the Squire. The parson, unhappily, was not aware of this. Most indiscreetly, he took upon himself to write a letter to Sir Geoffrey making a personal matter of it. He received what the autocrat of Nether-Applewhite called a "stinger." Hamlin apologised, but the mischief had been done. Lastly—one hesitates to record such a trifle—the parson was a total

abstainer, not a bigot, nor one to force his opinions instead of wine down a guest's throat, but all the same, a man who passed the decanter with a certain air of superiority. Mrs. Hamlin, who had helped to keep the peace, was dead. Hamlin was left with four stout sons and a pretty daughter.

Some few days after the events recorded in the last chapter, Joyce Hamlin was sitting at breakfast with her father. Hamlin, black-avized, with pale, clear skin, big but gaunt, gobbled up his food with that indifference to it so common to men of his character. Joyce ministered to him faithfully. Since his wife's death, Hamlin had become even more absorbed in his work, and talked of little else. Joyce served as housekeeper and curate. When he rose and filled his pipe she said cheerfully:

"Any particular orders, daddy?"

"You might see Bonsor about those repairs in the chancel. We shall have the roof falling in before we know where we are."

"Mr. Bonsor has referred the matter to the Squire."

"Perhaps a word to old Fishpingle would expedite things."

"If I see him, I'll mention it."

"Or, better still, attack Lady Pomfret."

Joyce laughed.

"Same thing, daddy."

"Eh?"

"Lady Pomfret manipulates the Squire through Fishpingle."

Hamlin saw no humour in this. Strategy exasperated him. He practised direct methods, frontal attack, with the accompanying heavy artillery of argument.

"Letters late, as usual," he said testily. "Postman chattering at the hall when he ought to be halfway through the village. How long, O Lord, how long?"

He broke out into sharp criticism and condemnation of the old order, stigmatised as selfish, domineering, and negligent. Joyce listened deferentially. It was a real grief to her that parson and squire pulled against each other, because she saw clearly how much might have been achieved had they pulled together. Anyway, the Pomfrets had been charming to her and her brothers.

A bouncing parlourmaid entered with the belated letters and the *Westminster Gazette*, which arrived by post, some three hours ahead of the daily papers—another Hamlin grievance. Hamlin took the letters from the servant, who went out. One letter, with a Rawal-Pindi postmark upon the envelope, was addressed to Joyce. Her father said carelessly:

"Who is your India correspondent?"

Joyce answered as carelessly:

"Lionel Pomfret."

Hamlin opened his *Westminster* and became absorbed in a leading article. Joyce opened her letter, read it, and re-read it. She sat in her late mother's place at the head of the table. Hamlin was standing near the

window. She started slightly when she heard his voice.

"What does young Pomfret 'say for himself?"

"He is coming home. Oh, dear!"

Hamlin raised his dark brows. Joyce explained, less calmly:

"He begged me not to mention it."

"How absurd! How could his coming home concern anybody except himself and his people? Obviously a Pomfret, saturated with a sense of his own importance."

Joyce had plenty of spirit. She retorted pleasantly but incisively:

"You are mistaken, daddy, it might be better for Lionel if he had a greater sense of his own importance. Unless he has changed very much, he is altogether too modest and unassuming."

"Then why this ridiculous mystery about his comings and goings?"

"Because, I fancy, he may have told me first."

Her father nodded and left the dining-room. Alone in his small study he whistled softly to himself. He was no fool, and assuredly he was no snob. It had never occurred to him that Lionel Pomfret had more than a brotherly interest in his girl. Before he went to India, the pair had played tennis together, but what of that? Lionel had been far more intimate with Joyce's brothers.

Why should he write to her first?

Why shouldn't he?

But Joyce had blushed a little as he left the dining-room. He attempted for the first time to envisage her as a wife, a mother. Everything that was hard in the parson softened as he beheld his daughter with a child in her arms, mistress in her own house, independent of him altogether.

Upon second thoughts, he decided finally that he was leaping to unwarrantable conclusions. She would have read a love-letter alone in her room. And she was incapable of deceit.

Still, her blush worried him, and the artless avowal that Lionel had written to her first. Yes, yes; something might come of this. A great joy, perhaps a greater sorrow. One conviction troubled him. Sir Geoffrey would make himself intolerably unpleasant.

Meanwhile, Joyce's blush lingered upon her cheeks. Her father's hasty exit disturbed her. She was quite aware of what she had done, of the thoughts which her indiscreet words must have provoked. She wondered if she could allay such thoughts by showing him the letter. It was a jolly letter, a sincere reflection of the writer, so that it seemed to be the spoken rather than the written word. It might have been dashed off by one subaltern to another. Joyce had half a dozen such epistles upstairs. It may be added here that no love passages, in the literal sense, had taken place between these two correspondents.

But—she had blushed.

And she was the first to be told that he was coming home.

Joyce put away the letter with the others, and set forth on her common round. Such as it was, it sufficed her. She held her head high, and little of interest escaped her brown eyes. Town girls would have pitied her. She pitied them. Not to know the names of birds and flowers and butterflies, to be detached from interest in humbler neighbours, to be denied the privilege of small ministrations, must surely take from life much of the joy in living. Her sense of the present, so vivid and acute, her happy ignorance of life outside her tiny circle, prevented her from traffics, voyages and discoveries into the future.

Beside the river, she dawdled a little, having marked down several trout which might, later on, be captured by a Green Jacket. She hoped that Lionel would not miss the big May-fly rise in June. If he left India at once he would arrive in the nick of time. She recalled his tremendous triumph beneath the bridge, a thirteen pounder caught with a lump of raw beef. *The Field* had a paragraph about it. He was a boy of sixteen at the time, and she a fat child of ten. She had scampered at his bidding to the Pomfret Arms to get a landing net.

Halfway down the village she met Bonsor, who tried to escape from her. He "bobbed"—the Squire's descriptive word—when she mentioned the chancel. And he evaded searching

questions concerning the thatching of certain cottages. Joyce inquired politely after the Squire, and learned that he was furious because a local sanitary inspector had condemned some pigsties. Bonsor speculated vaguely as to the future of a world where such interference was possible, and then went his solitary way, grumbling and growling. Joyce wondered why the Squire employed Bonsor. Her father scrapped him as hopelessly out of touch with modern conditions. But Bonsor, although a Hampshire man, had married in Nether-Applewhite. He had become, accordingly, one of Sir Geoffrey's people. The Squire would never scrap him.

By noon, she had reached the Hall. As she approached the front door she saw Lady Pomfret, busily engaged on the lawn clipping obtruding twigs from a topiary group of hen and chickens cunningly fashioned out of box. Her delight and satisfaction in such tiny accessories to a great place appealed deeply to Joyce, constrained, as she was, to find her pleasure in similar insignificant things. Lady Pomfret kissed her, and at touch of her lips the girl guessed that the great news had reached the mother.

"Lionel is coming home," said Lady Pomfret. "I believe, my dear, that I am the happiest woman in England."

To Joyce's surprise she was kissed again.

"How splendid," said Joyce.

Lady Pomfret glanced at her keenly, but no blush stole into Joyce's cheeks.

"You must stay to luncheon, child. At

this moment, Fishpingle, I believe, is decanting a bottle of our 'Yellow Seal' port, and the Squire is assisting him. We were a little put out this morning about some condemned pigsties, but we have forgotten that. And, by the way, have you walked up here to see a lonely old woman, or is your visit—parochial?"

"Both," said Joyce.

"Ah! Well, under the special circumstances, shall we decide to side-track—I learnt that word from dear Lionel—the parochial part. If you like you can tell me."

"Father wanted so much to know about the chancel repairs. He believes that the roof may fall in."

The Pomfret family pew happened to be in the chancel, another bone of contention between parson and squire. Lady Pomfret's kind eyes perceived that Joyce was ill at ease, unhappy at mentioning one of many things left undone. She tapped her cheek.

"How nice of your father to be thinking of me. He, brave man, would stand erect if the heavens fell. Now, I promise you that the roof shall be put in order."

Joyce thanked her, much relieved. Lady Pomfret continued gaily:

"Fortified by you, I feel encouraged to spy upon the Squire. Walk with me to Fishpingle's room. I will bet you a pair of gloves that we shall find those two wicked men drinking port as well as decanting it."

"Before luncheon?"

"And when I think what I went through at Harrogate last year!"

They strolled along so leisurely that we will take the liberty of preceding them.

The information that pigsties in his village had been condemned by some Jack in-Office had reached the Squire overnight. And the vials of his wrath had been poured upon Bonsor before breakfast. At breakfast Sir Geoffrey heard from his son. Straightway woes and tribulations melted like snowflakes in front of a roaring fire. The boy affirmed that he was hard as nails, and ready for the time of his life. He should have it, b' Jove! His leave would last over the cubbing and possibly the opening meet in November. And the buck-hounds would be hunting in August. Why had that damned mare lamed herself? Lionel was just the weight for her. But the boy should be mounted if his father went afoot. Would it be a decent fishing season? Of course they must entertain, fill the old house with the right sort, do the thing well. Girls, too, the pick of the county, with a sparkler or two from Mayfair?

Thus the Squire, giving tongue to a breast-high scent.

Lady Pomfret smiled and nodded.

From his wife, the Squire hurried to Fishpingle. All that he had said to his wife he repeated, with additions, to his dear old Ben. And then, together, they went "down cellar."

The cellars at Pomfret Court were holy ground, entered taper in hand, a sanctuary,

where none save the elect might wander. The Squire believed, of course, in laying down wine. And, oddly enough, what the unthinking might have indicted as extravagance and superfluity had turned out a sound investment. The Squire had a palate, and he bought his wine from first-rate people. He boasted that his port and champagne cost him nothing. He laid down double the quantity he needed and sold half when the wine matured. He had not been so successful with claret.

The main feature of the Pomfret cellars was a stone chamber in the form of a pentagon, from which branched five passages lined with bins. The chamber and passages, either by design or happy chance, registered the right temperature all the year round. In Sir Guy's day—in his hot youth—orgies had taken place in this pentagonal chamber. A round table, glittering with plate and glass, was laid for four choice spirits. Acolytes brought bottle after bottle from the adjoining bins. Upon one of these occasions, so the legend ran, four men consumed twelve magnums of Château Lafite! Sir Guy was the friend of the First Gentleman in Europe.

Solemn as this great occasion was, the Spirit of Comedy illumined it. Charles, the second footman, carrying two winebaskets, was in attendance. Fishpingle, need it be said, would have perished at the stake rather than entrust one bottle of the precious "Yellow Seal," Cockburn's 1868 vintage, to such a hobbledehoy. The wine-cupboard upstairs, which held the wine in

everyday use, needed replenishing. Hence the presence of Charles, trembling with excitement at the privilege vouchsafed him. To fill his baskets and despatch their carrier was Fishpingle's first and easiest task. Then, in silence, Squire and butler approached the sacred bin. At this moment such a crash as is rarely heard except in farce or pantomime rang through the vaulted chambers. Fishpingle spoke first to his startled master.

"Charles has fallen from the top of the stairway to the bottom."

Sir Geoffrey could be trusted to show his quality in such emergencies. He knew that every bottle of wine was smashed, and the wine was good wine. He said suavely:

"I hope, Ben, that the boy has not hurt himself."

Fishpingle was not at his best. He said almost rancorously:

"I hope, Sir Geoffrey, that he has broken his neck, but I'll go and inquire."

He returned with the information that Charles had pitched on his head, and therefore none the worse for his misadventure.

Two bottles of the "Yellow Seal" were taken to Fishpingle's room. Sir Geoffrey led the way with one, Fishpingle followed with t'other. Alfred brought old Waterford glass decanters from the pantry.

The rites began. After carefully drawing the corks, Fishpingle inserted into the necks of the bottles two fids of cotton-wool soaked in alcohol. The alcohol—according to Fishpingle—destroyed

any fungus growth between the neck of the bottle and the cork. A small quantity of wine was then poured into a glass, and solemnly smelt by each man in turn. They smiled ecstatically. Two fresh glasses were filled to the brim, and held up to the light.

"Beautiful," murmured the Squire.

"Brilliant," added Fishpingle.

"Master Lionel, God bless him!" said the Squire.

Fishpingle's voice quavered, as he repeated the toast.

"Master Lionel, God bless him!"

They sipped the wine, winking at each other.

"What a breed, Ben!"

"What vinosity, Sir Geoffrey!" He looked at the nectar with a melancholy smile, as he continued: "There was a time, Sir Geoffrey, when a gentleman drank a decanter of this after dinner. And now, one bottle amongst four men."

"Not if I'm of that party," replied the Squire briskly. "Sit ye down, Ben, sit ye down. We'll have a second glass presently and another toast."

They sat down at the Cromwellian table, with the decanter between them. A full week had elapsed since Fishpingle's confidential talk with Lady Pomfret, and, so far, the Squire had not spoken a word about Alfred and Prudence. Probably—so Fishpingle reflected—her ladyship had assured Sir Geoffrey that it was wiser to leave the young people alone. Upon the other and more important matter of selling the Reynolds

Fishpingle had kept silence, biding the right opportunity. At this moment he wondered whether it was about to present itself.

Sir Geoffrey harked back to his son.

"He has six months' leave, Ben."

"Good. Master Lionel will be back in India, by December."

Sir Geoffrey did not misunderstand this.

"Pooh, pooh! He's grown into a strong man."

"From the bottom of my heart I hope so."

Sir Geoffrey sipped his wine, glancing at Fishpingle out of the corner of his eye. He was growing ripe for confidences. He began blusterously:

"Damn you, Ben, you've given me a nasty taste in the mouth. Master Lionel will make old bones. I feel that in *my* bones. Enough of that. We must give him the welcome he deserves, but I could wish, for his sake, that we had more shots in the locker—what?"

Fishpingle inclined his head. The opportunity had come. But he waited for the Squire to plunge deeper into his difficulties.

"'The little more, and—and——'"

Fishpingle completed the quotation.

"'And how much it is;

And the little less, and what miles away!'"

"Yes, yes—what a memory you've got, Ben. I forget these confounded jingles. Where were we? You've put me off with your rhymes."

"The empty locker," suggested Fishpingle, sipping his wine.

"Just so. A very few hundreds added to my shrinking income would make such an immense difference to this dear lad's home-coming."

Fishpingle picked his way warily.

"The income, for instance, from twenty thousand pounds."

"Tchah! Why do you jaw about specific sums? Twenty thousand pounds! Is such a sum as that likely to drop from heaven on me! Talk practical politics, you old ass. Can we scrape up a few tenners and fivers?"

"You can put your hand on twenty thousand pounds, Sir Geoffrey."

Sir Geoffrey lay back in his chair, staring at his butler.

"Are you going dotty, Ben?"

"That particular sum hangs in the dining-room." He leant forward, meeting the Squire's eyes. For a moment the Squire failed to catch his meaning. When that meaning percolated to his marrow, he swore prodigiously, as our Army, long ago, was said to have sworn in Flanders. His glance became congested. With a gulp, he tossed off his wine.

"There!" he spluttered, "you've made me choke over the best wine in the world. Sell the Sir Joshua, which, by the way, isn't mine to sell? Sell the finest picture in the house? Dammy, you are mad. What d'ye mean, hay?" He glared fiercely at the one man living whom he could have sworn to be incapable of making such an amazing suggestion.

Fishpingle paid no attention to his ebullition of indignation.

"Heirlooms, very valuable heirlooms, can be sold, Sir Geoffrey, under certain conditions."

The Squire exploded again.

"This is the limit. You've thought of this —you—*you!* I supposed, dash it! that you were drawing a bow at a venture, firing into the 'brown.' Not a bit of it! You really mean it." Fishpingle bowed. "It's a deliberate suggestion. Why not put a halter about my lady, and sell her at auction in Salisbury market-place? Ha—ha! Why not start an old curiosity shop with the family plate and furniture? We should do a roarin' trade. However, there it is. You're not a Pomfret. We might sell some land, hay?"

"Yes. That outlying strip—for building purposes."

"My God! The man *is* dotty."

His old master looked so genuinely concerned and distressed that Fishpingle melted. His voice quavered; he held out his hands entreatingly.

"Sir Geoffrey, I know how you feel. We were boys together. I am, I hope, part of the family, and as—as proud of it as you are. But this—this sacrifice would put things right for you—and Master Lionel."

"Much you know about him," the Squire growled out, "if you think he would be a party to such a—a violation, yes, violation, of all our traditions. Not another word!" He raised his

hand peremptorily. "I shall overlook this outrageous suggestion, Ben, because you mean well—you mean well. I lost my temper, I admit it, because I thought you knew me, through and through, and shared my feelings about this property and what goes with it, which, mark you, is a sacred trust for which—a—I deem myself accountable. Finish your wine, man!" Fishpingle drained his glass. "Now"—the Squire's voice rang out cheerily—"we will forget all this. I've another toast. Fill your glass and mine. We'll drink it standing."

Fishpingle obeyed his instructions. The two men stood up. Sir Geoffrey laughed, as he held up his glass.

"The toast, Ben, is worthy of the wine. I give you: Master Lionel's wife!"

Fishpingle nearly dropped his glass.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Is Master Lionel married?"

The Squire chuckled.

"Had you there, Ben. You rose like a fat trout at a May-fly. I give the toast again: Master Lionel's future wife!"

"He's found her?"

"Not yet, but I think I have. Drink, man, drink."

Fishpingle repeated the words of the toast.

"Master Lionel's future wife."

The Squire added firmly:

"May God bless her and her children!"

"May God bless her and her children!"

The toast was drunk, and the men sat down again. The Squire chuckled as he went on sipping his port. His face radiated good humour and happy expectations. He lowered his voice and his glass.

"Now, Ben, I am going to tell you something. I met the other day a most charming young lady, a dasher, sir, a dasher, clean bred, in the Stud Book, best stock in the kingdom, pretty, intelligent, and an heiress. Better still, she has no big place of her own."

"Might I ask the name, Sir Geoffrey?"

"Lady Margot Maltravers, the late Lord Beaumanoir's only child."

"An only child?" Fishpingle repeated the words reflectively.

"Why do you sit there lookin' like an owl in an ivy bush? By the luck of things, Lady Margot is an only child. What of it? What of it?"

"Nothing. Master Lionel is an only child."

"Don't rub that in! Why did Providence send my parson four sons? I ask such questions, but, b' Jove, I can't answer them. Can you?"

It will never be known whether Fishpingle could have answered the Squire's question, because, at this moment, Lady Pomfret floated into the room, followed by Joyce Hamlin. The two men rose. Instantly the Squire became the gentleman of the old school. He greeted Joyce as if she were a duchess. He smiled charmingly at his wife. Lady Pomfret raised her hand and

pointed whimsically at the decanters. Then she looked at Ben reproachfully.

"Oh, Ben, I thought you knew better than to allow Sir Geoffrey to drink port before luncheon. And when I remember what I went through at Harrogate——!"

"I went through it, not you, my dear Mary."

He took a lovely rose from his buttonhole and presented it to his wife as a propitiatory offering. She accepted it, shaking her head and smiling.

"You will go there alone, Geoffrey, next time."

"A glass of port would do you good, Mary."

She declined with thanks. Sir Geoffrey turned to Joyce.

"Well, Joyce, my dear, you look blooming this morning. What a colour! No air like our air. And, of course, you have heard our news, which—a—justifies, ha! a glass of port before luncheon."

Lady Pomfret noted what was left in the decanter.

"Our news justified, perhaps, one glass, Geoffrey, not two."

"Tut, tut! Well, Joyce, I'll wager that my lady surprised you, hay?"

Joyce hesitated and was lost. A town girl might have dissembled, but George Hamlin's daughter had inherited her father's uncompromising code. Nevertheless, she replied with self-possession.

"Not surprised exactly, Sir Geoffrey."

"Bless my soul! Why not—why not?"

"You see I had a letter from Lionel by the same post."

Obviously, the Squire was taken aback, Lady Pomfret raised her delicate brows. Joyce continued hastily:

"He does write a jolly letter, so like himself, so full of fun."

"Um! Quite—quite."

Lady Pomfret said placidly:

"Dear Joyce is staying to luncheon. We are going into the garden. Do you wish to come with us, Geoffrey?"

"Join you presently," replied the Squire. "Ben and I are talking over a little business—ways and means, ways and means, and more ways than means, worse luck!"

The ladies withdrew. Sir Geoffrey moved to the fireplace, standing in front of it, facing Fishpingle and frowning.

"Ben?"

"Sir Geoffrey?"

"I'm a bit worried. You know, none better, that I've a nose." He stroked that well-formed feature as he spoke. "So have you. It's a devilish odd thing, but your nose—after pokin' itself into my affairs for a thousand years—has shaped itself after my pattern."

"I dare say, Sir Geoffrey. It's a good pattern."

"You heard that young lady just now, and you must have been surprised, as I was, although you stood like a graven image. She had a letter from Master Lionel this morning. Now, why

does he write to her? As between man and man, as between stout old friends, what d'ye make of it—hay?"

Fishpingle was not prepared to say what he made of it. Knowing his master, he temporised.

"Why shouldn't Master Lionel write to her?"

"Tchah! The boy doesn't write too often to me. I don't like this, Ben, I tell you I don't like it."

"Miss Hamlin is a very sweet young lady."

"Daughter of a Rad. Never knew that when I gave him the livin'. And who are the Hamlins, I ask you, spelt with an 'i'?"

"Mrs. Hamlin was a sweet lady, too."

"Sugary adjectives. You are damnable sentimental, Ben, and, and—a—saccharine. Good word that! Where was I? Your confounded interruptions always put me out of my stride. Yes, yes, I'm not a snob, but Mrs. Hamlin, if my memory serves me, was the daughter of an auctioneer. The girl is hairy at the heel, b' Jove."

"She isn't."

"You have the impudence to contradict me?"

"I thought we were speaking as man to man, as friends."

"So we are, so we are. But it was a slap in the face all the same. And, damn it, sir, any pretty girl can twist you round her finger. Keep your temper, Ben! Between you all my morning has been wrecked. I shall go and

hearten myself up with a squint at the new litter of pigs—fifteen little darlings. That old sow does her duty, b' Jove ! "

He clapped his hat upon his head and strode to the door. There he stood still for a moment, pulling himself together. His voice had quite recovered its geniality as he said in parting :

" With your hasty temper, old friend, you oughtn't to touch port."

Fishpingle heard his voice once more in the courtyard. Sir Geoffrey was speaking to his retriever.

" Good dog ! Fine handsome doggie ! Best dog in England, what ? Come and look at the piggy-wiggies with master."

Fishpingle crossed to the bookcase, and took out a well-used Peerage. Then he put on his spectacles. He sat down at the table and opened the ponderous tome. His fingers turned a few pages. He found " Beaumanoir " and read on.

CHAPTER IV

THE few weeks before Lionel's arrival passed pleasantly and without incident. Prudence may have sat on Alfred's knee, or wandered with him on Sunday afternoons, but the Squire was unaware of such doings. He remained engrossed in his preparations to provide entertainment for his son and heir, in Sir Geoffrey's eyes a dual personality. His son he regarded as a jolly boy, a st'un or two below right weight; his heir bulked larger above the horizon. Like all men of his kidney, he thought pessimistically of the future. We are writing of pre-war days, at a time when a now famous statesman was attacking the dukes, who, perhaps, of all men in exalted positions, least deserved such assaults. The Squire was keenly aware that the greater included the less, and that he, too, was assailed. How could he answer such attacks? He, and thousands in his position, writhed in secret because pride prohibited a recital of what had been done, the innumerable sacrifices, the paring down and remitting of rents, the private charities, the cheerful renunciation of luxuries, as a "set off" against much left undone through want of means. Could a gentleman of unblemished

lineage toot any horn other than that carried by him as M.F.H. ? Could he touch the pitch of public controversy and not be defiled ?

Nevertheless Sir Geoffrey carried a high head and a conviction that things would mend. Almost furtively, he would steal into his dining-room to stare with melancholy eyes at the Reynolds' beauty. A neighbouring county magnate had sold just such a masterpiece, and in its honoured place hung a copy of the original. "No copy for me," growled Sir Geoffrey to himself, thinking of awkward questions put by unsophisticated guests.

Fishpingle and he overhauled the estate accounts. The Squire employed no expert land agent. Possibly, what he gained in a saved salary was lost twice over owing to the management of an amateur. He employed his own people, a phrase ever in his mouth, and the Wiltshire peasant in the more remote districts is a blunted tool, quite unfit for the finer uses of high farming. Bonsor had no executive ability whatever. Fishpingle, on the other hand, had an instinct, almost infallible, about stock-breeding. His heart and soul were in it, like the Squire's. Fishpingle may have known what he had saved and made for his friend and master. The Squire, serenely unconscious of his debt, took the credit *en bloc* and whistled complacently.

We get a further glimpse of this honest gentleman, when we mention the fact that he stood out valiantly against motor cars till the last gasp from his wife. To please her,

he bought a limousine, and forthwith extolled it, because it was his, as the best car on the market, which it wasn't.

Night and day his thoughts wandered, in happy vagabondage, to Lady Margot Maltravers.

She spent a flying week-end before Lionel arrived.

Some description of the young lady must be attempted. The late Lord Beaumanoir had left his only child the freehold of a handsome house in London, some valuable town property, and a round sum securely invested in gilt-edged securities. The Beaumanoir estates and title passed to a distant kinsman. When she came of age, Lady Margot announced her intention of going "on her own." Having plenty to "go on," this announcement was acclaimed by poorer relations as indicating spirit and intelligence. Under cover of this chorus of praise, a few private loans were impetrated. Lady Margot lavished *largesse* with amusing cynicism. "I must pay for my whistle," she remarked to her intimates. "If I whistle the wrong tune, the poor dears will hold their tongues."

However, despite predictions to the contrary, she conducted herself circumspectly. It was true that minor poets were to be seen in her drawing-room and about her dining-table, with a sprinkling of artists, politicians, barristers, musicians, and novelists. She said that she liked to be amused. She had more than one flirtation. The "poor dears" feared that she had not treated her lovers well. She was

accused of luring them on and then laughing at them. When reproached she replied modestly: "Really, you know, they are hunting comfortable board and lodging rather than little me."

Little she was, although *mignonne* is a happier word. Her feet and hands were exquisite. It was said—perhaps truly—that Lady Margot bought her footwear from that mysterious personage who lives in Paris, and who has the effrontery to demand from his clients a big premium, cash on the nail, before he consents to supply them with shoes at a fabulous price. Her frocks were beyond compare, and she especially affected, in the evening, a vivid translucent emerald green that set off admirably the dead white of her complexion and her dark sparkling eyes and hair. Her portrait, by one of her admirers, was hung upon the line in the Royal Academy, and made the artist's reputation while enhancing hers.

About the time when she encountered our Wiltshire squire, Lady Margot was getting "fed up" with clever young men consumed by their own ambitions. In fine, they had ceased to amuse her. They ground their little axes too persistently. Indeed, she had captivated Sir Geoffrey at once by saying candidly: "You know, they wouldn't be missed. The real world would wag on without them."

Sir Geoffrey was quite of her opinion.

"Popinjays, my dear young lady, popinjays."

This queerly contrasted pair, the reactionary squire and the twentieth-century maiden, met at

a big Hampshire house, where the partridge driving is superlatively good. Sir Geoffrey happened to be a fine performer, a little slow with his second gun, but quick enough to shoot in the best company. To the humiliation of the younger men, Lady Margot accompanied the veteran, and highly commended his performance and his retriever's. He amused her more than the young men, because he was absolutely sincere. And she succumbed instantly to the gracious personality of Lady Pomfret, accepting with alacrity an invitation to visit Pomfret Court, openly chagrined when no early date was set.

She arrived in May, driving her Rolls-Royce, and accompanied by a chauffeur and a French maid.

Sir Geoffrey, as was his wont, received her at the front door. The warmth of the reception rather astonished her. But it was quite in keeping, so she reflected, with the hospitable air of the house, a fine specimen of late Elizabethan architecture. To luxury in its myriad phases she was accustomed; comfort, as the Pomfrets interpreted the word, might be more restful. She promised herself fresh and diverting experiences in studying types which she had supposed to be extinct.

This first visit was an enormous success.

She beheld, of course, half a dozen different photographs of the Rifleman, and asked many questions concerning him.

"He is no popinjay," affirmed Sir Geoffrey.

"Do you call him clever?" she asked the proud father.

"Clever! Now, my dear, what the doose d'ye mean by 'clever'?"

"Quite frankly; Sir Geoffrey, I ask for information."

"Am I clever?" demanded the Squire.

"Oh no, dear Geoffrey," said his wife, tranquilly.

The three persons were at tea in what was known as the Long Saloon, a charming room with two great oriel windows, similar to those at Montacute, embellished by innumerable achievements, escutcheons setting forth in stained glass the armorial bearings of the families that had intermarried with the Pomfrets. The walls were panelled in oak palely golden with age. Against these walls stood cabinets of Queen Anne and the Georges filled with English porcelain. There were lovely bits of Chinese lacquer, many chintz-covered sofas and chairs, two well-worn Persian carpets, and tables of all sizes and shapes. Every article looked as if it had stood still for generations. Lady Margot said happily that here was exactly the right setting for her hosts. The room shone with the same soft lustre that gleamed from the silver of the tea equipage two centuries old.

Sir Geoffrey laughed.

"Are *you* clever, Mary?"

"Here and there, Geoffrey, where my own interests are vitally concerned."

Lady Margot stuck to her point.

"Is your son interested in art and literature?"

Her listeners failed to detect a slight accent of derision.

"Um! He's an outdoor man, as I am. I can tell you this. He is interested in persons. He is the most popular fellow in Nether-Applewhite."

"Really? I look forward to making his acquaintance."

At this the Squire chuckled.

He would have laughed aloud, had he realised that his guest was indeed more interested in his son than she was prepared to admit, even to herself. The photographs captivated her. She made certain that Lionel Pomfret was utterly different from the young men who frequented her own house. She recognised in him the *preux chevalier*. With such parents could he be anything else? Leaping to quite unjustifiable conclusions, she decided, also, that this only son must have taken from father and mother what was best in each. Perhaps, for the first time in her variegated life, she became romantic. Nobody, as yet, had whetted her imagination.

If Sir Geoffrey had divined all this!

Presently, when many of Prudence's fancy cakes had been eaten, Sir Geoffrey led his guest to the farther window.

"Do you see anything familiar?" he asked.

"Of course. How exciting! Our coat. Have our families intermarried?"

"In 1625, when Charles the First ascended his throne."

"I must look that up."

"We will do so together."

Upon the following Monday morning she whirled away, leaving a gap behind her. Sir Geoffrey waxed a thought too enthusiastic. Lady Pomfret admitted her intelligence and good-breeding.

"Mary, you are lukewarm."

"I suspend judgment. What does Ben say?"

"Ben—Ben? I haven't asked Ben. I needn't ask him. Quality is everything with the old fellow. He will bore me stiff raving about her. She was uncommonly civil to him. A witch, my dear, a witch."

"You burn her alive with this excess of praise."

Fishpingle, however, who went fishing with the Squire that same Monday afternoon, did not rave about Lady Margot Maltravers. The Squire did so for him, and believed that what he said had been said by his faithful henchman. He caught more trout than Fishpingle, and returned home in exuberant spirits.

Whether by accident or design, Joyce Hamlin was not asked to meet the "dasher."

The problem of ways and means for an heir's suitable entertainment was solved triumphantly by the Squire, without a hint from either my lady or old Ben. Sir Geoffrey went to town alone. He returned, next day, inflated with a sense of his own cleverness and craft. He had

let the shooting! Fishpingle was visibly impressed and touched. In the memory of man the Pomfret shootings had been rigorously preserved by and for the Pomfret squires. The sacrifice almost matched that of Abraham. And —unlike the Patriarch—the Squire had measured what that sacrifice meant to his son—practically nothing.

"Our partridges are never driven till early November, and by that time Lionel will be in the Red Sea. Well, well, I hope my old pals will keep my guns warm."

Lady Pomfret kissed him. He had brought her a trinket from Cartier's, a tiny brooch as dainty as herself. As he was pinning it into a lace jabot, she asked anxiously:

"Oh, Geoffrey, did you remember to order a new dress suit?"

"I remembered not to order it. I prefer old togs."

In the good old days before rents fell and prices rose, Sir Geoffrey had owned a small cutter, which lay in Southampton Water, and with which he had won several races. All that was left of this gallant craft might be found in a stout oak box under the stairs in the hall, a box full of flags, gay bunting wherewith the Squire decorated his house upon great occasions. You may be sure that all these little flags were strung out upon the afternoon of Lionel's arrival. The father met his son at Salisbury; the mother, and a goodly number of the Squire's "people,"

assembled on the lawn. Perhaps the boy himself, after he had kissed his mother, said all that can be said on such delightful occasions. After an absence of four years, an absence that had turned him from a delicate stripling into a healthy man, he stood upon the steps of his old home and gazed affectionately at the honest, beaming faces upturned to his. The welcoming cheers died away. There was no sound save the cawing of the rooks in the beeches behind the house. Lionel said impulsively:

"I say, it is jolly to be at home again. It's the jolliest moment of my life."

That was all and quite enough. The Squire led the way into the dining-room, and his people followed to drink health and prosperity to the heir. The oldest tenant made a short speech, Lionel replied in a dozen words. The visitors soon drifted away. Father, mother, and son were left alone.

"He's a man," said the Squire.

The mother smiled happily, noting subtler changes than the merely physical. He had grown into a man, true. India had burnt him brown. Hard work and exercise had taken away a certain boyish immaturity, but in essentials he remained much the same—impulsive, affectionate, and ingenuous. His clear eyes met hers with no reservations. His laugh had the same joyous spontaneity. But in his voice were new inflections. He spoke with a crisper decision, with something of his sire's authority. He carried himself with an air——! Lady Pomfret divined

instantly that he had ceased to be an echo of family traditions and predilections. He would take his own line across any country. She decided, as quickly, that he was still heart-whole. No woman stood between mother and son.

That first evening became an imperishable memory. The two men she loved best were at their best. She sat silent, looking at them, listening to ancient family jokes, revelling in the present and yet conscious that her thoughts were straying into the future. Lionel just touched upon his health. The regimental doctor, a capital chap, pronounced him sound.

"He vetted me before I left. Clean bill."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the Squire heartily.

Lionel talked much of soldiering. The Squire nodded portentously, not quite at his ease. He wanted his boy to be "keen." At the same time, soldiering with Lionel was intended to be a means rather than an end. For five pleasant years Sir Geoffrey had served in the Brigade of Guards. Straitened fortunes had prevented the Squire from putting his son into his old regiment, but he had no regrets about that. Foreign service had done the trick. Nevertheless, the time was coming swiftly when the boy must take up other interests and responsibilities. An infusion of pipeclay was in his marrow. Pomfrets had served their sovereigns by land and sea, but the heir of the family—in his opinion—could render better service on his own land. For the moment he kept such thoughts to himself.

Lady Pomfret went upstairs at eleven. The

Squire and Lionel sat together till after midnight. Alone with his son, the father—not a man of great perspicacity—became oddly sensible of the change which the mother had divined so quickly. Obviously, Lionel did not see eye to eye with his senior upon certain matters. To the Squire, need it be said, life generally, his life, was a cut-and-dried affair. He believed devoutly in his own order; he detested perplexing compromises; a thing, b' Jove! was right or wrong. Being an ardent fox-hunter, an ex-master of hounds, he pursued his objectives without much regard for obstacles, although he availed himself of gaps in stiff fences. And till very lately he had ridden first-class horses — which makes a tremendous difference to a man's "going." Lionel, he perceived, had a touch of the "trimmer" in him. When the Squire—as was inevitable—spoke of the increasing troubles of the landed gentry, Lionel was not disposed to take for granted, what the Squire did, that the land-owners were the unhappy victims of circumstance and democratic tendency. The boy hinted unmistakably that even county potentates had something to learn about organisation and economy. He spoke incisively of his own profession, tactfully shifting the ground from Wiltshire to India.

"We have to work harder," he remarked cheerfully. "But we don't yet work hard enough. We shall find that out if there is a big row and we come up against fellows who work harder than we do."

"Um!"

Lionel continued with more diffidence :

"It seems to me, father, that it is always a case of the survival of the fittest. If the landed gentry can't hold their own, they'll be scrapped."

"Good God!"

"You can't get away from it. There it is."

"Scrapped! What a word!"

"Beastly. But, as I said just now, some neighbours of ours, your own intimate friends, are tackling jobs they don't understand. You stick to the old acres. Do they? And take your own case and mine. Is life in a jolly regiment really the right training for a man who must make his land pay or go under?"

"Do you want to leave the Rifle Brigade and go to an Agricultural College?"

"Not much. I've had a topping time, thanks to your generosity, sir; but, I ask you, when you were in the Coldstream what did you and your pals talk about?"

The Squire exploded, not loudly.

"I tell you this, sir: we didn't talk socialism."

Lionel laughed.

"I'll bet you didn't. I know what you talked about. We jaw on about the same good old subjects still, but half the fellows in our mess are in much the same position that I am. Their fathers, like you, own properties with decreasing rent-rolls. We have to talk about that sometimes."

"I should like to hear your conclusions."

"Right O! But they must be your own,

more or less. The thing whittles itself down to efficiency. The very biggest men, the dukes, for instance, employ experts. The smaller men can't afford that."

"Go on," growled Sir Geoffrey, half-pleased, half-resentful. He was agreeably surprised to find that his boy possessed opinions which at any rate challenged attention. He was disagreeably aware that those opinions might clash with his own.

Lionel went on :

"If the smaller men can't afford experts to run their estates, they must supply the necessary knowledge themselves. That means hard work and at best small pay. *And*—more intelligence in the working."

"We'll go to bed," said the Squire.

He rose, looking affectionately at his son.

"By the way," he said lightly, "I've let the shootin' this year, but that won't affect you."

"Let the shooting ?"

The Squire nodded. Lionel's disconcerted face rather pleased him. The boy was a chip of the old block. He added curtly :

"I shan't make a habit of it. The extra money comes in handy."

Lionel hesitated and flushed.

"Are you really hard up ?"

"Well—yes. Let's leave it at that." His voice became genial. "I told you to-night, because old Ben would be sure to blurt it out to you to-morrow morning. No complaints !

You're at home again, and as fit as a fiddle. Don't worry! We shall pull through."

Lionel's expressive face remained pensive and distressed. An awful thought flitted into Sir Geoffrey's head. To banish it was instinctive. He clutched his son's arm.

"I take it, my boy, that you ain't entangled with any woman or girl out there—what?"

Lionel laughed.

"Lord, no! What an idea!"

The Squire beamed at him.

"Well, well—these things happen. We must find you a nice little wife, old chap, with a bit o' money—a bit o' money. Yes, yes, God forbid that any son of mine should marry for money, but why not follow the Quaker's advice to his son, and go where money is?"

"Why not?" said Lionel, smiling back at his father.

They went arm-in-arm through the hall, and then to bed.

When the Squire reached the big room in which Lionel had been born he found Lady Pomfret still up and wide awake. The Squire chided her, but confessed that he was not feeling sleepy himself.

"It's been a day of great excitements. Mary, my dear, we have reason to be proud and grateful. The boy has turned into a fine young fellow. I wish you could have seen his face when I told him about the shootin'. He stared at me as if the heavens had fallen. And his

concern, of course, was entirely on my account. Very gratifying—very. Another thing. No entanglements. I hinted at marriage, a nice little girl with a bit o' money. He laughed and replied: 'Why not?' Of course, there must be no pressure, not a pennyweight. But I warn you, he has ideas. He marches—a—with the times."

"Do you mean away from—us?"

"That remains to be seen. He is keen about his profession."

"You regret that?"

"Yes, and no. Our grandchildren, Mary, will wean him from pipeclay."

As he spoke, he kissed her tranquil face and whispered a compliment.

"You looked so young and pretty to-night. I hardly see you as a grandmother."

She touched his arm softly.

"We won't count those blessed chicks till they're hatched."

Something in her tone arrested the Squire's attention. He said sharply:

"Why not, Mary? Anticipation in such a vital matter is a joy that I, most certainly, shall not renounce."

"If—if there should be disappointment?"

"Why apprehend anything so unlikely?"

"Because Lady Margot—if your dreams come true—is the last of her branch of the family. I have never seen her in *my* dreams with a baby in her pretty arms."

"Nonsense, Mary, nonsense. Sitting up

late is always bad for you. To bed with you! I shall go to my dressing-room."

He moved to the dressing-room door, and then came back, half-smiling, half-frowning.

"I see the fly in your ointment. Lady Margot is *petite*. And what of it? Large women do not necessarily have large families. Mrs. Hamlin was no bigger than Lady Margot, and she presented Hamlin with four whoppin' big boys. I have often wondered, my dear Mary, why the wives of poor parsons are so needlessly prolific."

Lady Pomfret smiled ironically.

"The doctrine of Compensation, Geoffrey."

"Perhaps. Now—pop into bed!"

In the bachelor's wing Lionel was smoking the last cigarette before turning in. He stood at the widely opened window, staring at the park, lying silver-white beneath a waning moon. Against the silvery spaces of turf the yews stood out sharply black—*sable* upon *argent*. The fallow deer were grazing just beyond the lawn. In the distance he could see the winding line of the river.

But he frowned as he looked out upon that goodly heritage which in the fullness of time would be his. The significant fact that the shooting had been let festered him. He remembered, going back to the old Eton days, that his father had always "groused" about lack of cash, other fellows' fathers did the same. It had never occurred to him to take such grumblings too seriously. Indeed, comparing

his comfortable, beautiful home with other homes, he had felt a little sore at these grumblings. To keep such an establishment as Pomfret, to entertain handsomely, to hunt and shoot, meant an income not far off five figures. It might have shrunk, no doubt, but enough and to spare was left.

But letting the shooting——!

"Damn!" he exclaimed.

Why had his father not confided in him? The question was easily answered. The Squire had old-fashioned ideas. Quite probably his own wife did not know the exact amount of his income. More—grouse as he could and did to neighbours and friends Sir Geoffrey's cherished code prevented him from sharing money anxieties with his wife. She would know, of course, that money was not so plentiful, but he would be punctilious in keeping from her actual details.

And that hint about marrying a nice girl with money——

Lionel swore softly again, and again. He realised that his home-coming was less joyous, and he had something to confess to his sire on the morrow which assuredly would detract from the merry-makings. He decided that he would talk things over with old Fishpingle first.

However, being young and healthy he went to bed and fell asleep within a few minutes. The Squire in his big four-poster slept as soundly. Lady Pomfret lay awake till the small hours.

CHAPTER V

LIONEL awoke early. He was lying in his own bed—at home. For the moment nothing else mattered. Soon he would get up, and scurry round his old haunts before breakfast. He felt an Eton boy again, back for the holidays, with no confounded first school ahead of him. His eye rested upon certain framed photographs by Hills and Saunders. He had not distinguished himself very greatly at Eton, either in the classrooms or in the playing fields, but he had enjoyed himself and held his own. At Sandhurst, later on, he had been even happier, although his health had provoked anxieties.

He glanced out of window. A capital morning for fishing! He knew that the Squire had duties, never neglected, upon the bench of magistrates. Old Fishpingle would be available as a companion. They would make a day of it. His mother would come down to the river for luncheon. Then his thoughts flitted to the Vicarage. What a jolly girl Joyce Hamlin was! No nonsense about her. Rosy as a Ribstone pippin and as sound at core. She might make a fourth at luncheon and square a charming circle. He had half expected to see her on

the lawn to welcome him, but she was full of tact—bless her! She guessed, of course, that his father and mother would want him to themselves, and she couldn't be dismissed like a tenant. He'd just nip in and shake her hand before breakfast.

With this happy thought percolating through his mind, he jumped out of bed, and rang for Alfred, who appeared grinning as usual. Lionel chaffed him, asking innumerable questions, amongst them this: "Had he secured a sweetheart?" Alfred, who bore to his young master something of the affection which had linked together the Squire and Fishpingle, unbosomed himself promptly. Yes; he and Prudence had made it up to get married, but the Squire was hostile. Lionel, much surprised, asked more questions, and elicited all the story.

"He'll come round," affirmed Lionel, alluding to his father. "And, perhaps, I can slip in a word. First cousins be damned! You and little Prue are the star couple of Nether-Applewhite."

"Thank 'ee, Master Lionel. We be fair achin' to earn money."

"What d'ye mean, Alfred?"

"Sir Geoffrey, he give a pound for every child born in parish, an' five pounds so be as God A'mighty sees fit to send twins."

"I say, the sooner you earn that money, the better."

Half an hour afterwards, he was inhaling deep breaths of air fresh from the downs. The

usual round engrossed him. A visit to the stables, a glance at the cricket pitch in the park, a squint at the river, and lastly—the Vicarage.

He found Joyce where he expected to find her, in the garden. No embarrassment showed itself on either side. They met, as they had parted, good friends, pals, as Lionel put it. He was as unaffectedly glad to see the maid, as she was to see him. But from her, without design on her part, came further corroboration of straitened means.

Lionel had said ingenuously: "I do hope, Joyce, that Squire and Parson pull together a little better than they did?"

Joyce answered as frankly: "As to that, Lionel, you can judge for yourself. Father thinks, as he always has thought, that if something is really wanted, he has only to ask for it, without"—she laughed not too mirthfully—"without any preliminary beating of bushes."

"Your father is dead right about that. He's the last man to ask for what isn't really wanted."

When Lionel insisted upon concrete information, Joyce told him the story of the chancel repairs, now in hand, thanks to Lady Pomfret's promise. She ended dismally:

"Father, somehow, won't realise that Sir Geoffrey is terribly cramped for ready money."

Lionel muttered as dismally:

"Is it as bad as that?"

She nodded.

He went on excitedly: "This is a nasty jar,

Joyce. I swear to you that it's bad news for me. I never suspected it. He ought to have told me."

A faint derision informed her next words.

"You ought to have guessed."

"Ought I?"

He considered this, frowning. Then they talked of lighter matters, each enchanted to note the changes in the other. Before they parted, after a half promise from Joyce that she might wander to the river, Lionel said abruptly:

"You are happy, Joyce? You look happy, but——"

"But?"

"There isn't much to amuse you here."

"I love the place and the people."

This statement of fact was weighed and not found wanting as Lionel hastened back to the Hall. Joyce was now a woman of twenty, but she retained the freshness and bloom of a girl of seventeen. Lionel guessed that she had filled her mother's place admirably. He compared her to his own mother. When a young man does this, he ought to see and recognise the road he is travelling. Lionel had no such sense of direction. He decided hastily that Joyce, being often in his mother's company, had grown delightfully like her.

He whistled as he strode along.

At breakfast, he told the tale of his wanderings. At mention of the Vicarage, the Squire remarked irritably:

"Joyce is well enough, a good girl, but

Hamlin is gettin' impossible. He does a lot of mischief in the village."

Lionel retorted warmly: "Father, he is incapable of that."

Lady Pomfret winced. But she hastened to add:

"Your dear father doesn't accuse Mr. Hamlin of making mischief deliberately."

At that, the Squire "took the floor." He spoke vehemently, with a feeling and emotion that surprised and confounded his son. Hamlin, first and last, was a Rad, with a Rad's pestilent notions about property. He stuck his nose into every pie in the parish. He positively exuded Socialism. The fellow was of the people and with the people. All his ideas were impossible and Utopian. Did he do mischief deliberately? Perhaps not. But, unconsciously, he set class against class. He was importunate in his demands—demands, b'Jove! which no landowner could grant without hostilising his farmers. Take wages. Concede, if you like, that wages were low in Wiltshire, about as low as the intelligence of the peasants. Concede, also, that in special cases a landowner might pay higher wages to his own outdoor servants, under-gardeners and the like. Concede all that, and then try it! And every farmer on your property would besiege you with protests, because they —poor devils!—couldn't pay higher wages. Outsiders never understood these things. It was like arguing about sport with fellows who weren't sportsmen. Hamlin had played cricket

for his 'Varsity, but he wasn't a sportsman. There you had it in a nutshell.

Under the table, Lady Pomfret gently pressed her son's foot. Wisely, he attempted no defence of the parson. The Squire recovered his good humour with a second rasher of home-cured bacon. As he rose from the table, he smiled genially at wife and son.

"I spoke my mind just now, the more strongly because I have to suppress such feelings. It comes to this, Lionel, when a fellow is making sacrifices, when he is paring down expenses right and left, when he is doing his damndest to 'carry on,' it is exasperating to be pestered for the extra inch when you have cheerfully given the ell."

He blew his nose with violence and left the dining-room.

"Dear fellow!" murmured Lady Pomfret. "He has been horribly worried during the last four years."

Lionel looked and felt dazed. He supposed that Lady Pomfret invariably sided with her husband. Not out of any insincerity or moral weakness, but because she was of his generation and shared his views which were in all honesty focussed upon his duties and responsibilities. As much could be said of Hamlin. Lionel's mind remained quite clear on this point. What confused and distressed him was the sudden realisation of cheese-paring, of sacrifice, of anxieties which he had ignored till this moment.

"Then it is true," he murmured.

"What is true, my dear?"

"That we are much less well off than I had ever suspected."

"I am afraid that is true, Lionel."

"Surely you know, mother?"

"Not everything."

"Good Lord!"

"The mortgage has always eaten into his peace of mind."

"The mortgage? I never knew there was a mortgage."

"That is why I sit with my back to the portrait of your great-grandfather."

She explained matters to a wondering son. He listened impatiently, tapping the carpet with his foot, irritated perhaps unduly because of his own ignorance and impotence. When Lady Pomfret had finished, he tried, for her sake, to speak lightly—

"If I had known all this, mother, I might have helped him."

"How?"

"I could have worried along on a less generous allowance. As it is——!" He broke off, with a gesture. She reassured him gently:

"Your father put you into a good regiment, and he has allowed you what he decided was necessary. If you asked him to give you less, he would refuse."

Lionel exhibited a trace of his father's obstinacy.

"We shall see about that," he muttered.

Then he kissed her tenderly, stroking her delicate hand.

"It has been beastly for both of you. And you two have always looked so comfy and prosperous."

Lady Pomfret laughed.

"Call us mummers, Lionel. We have been forced to keep up appearances. Most of our friends are in the same boat. I see the comic side of it all and the tragic."

Lionel smoked an after-breakfast pipe alone. Tobacco, however, failed to soothe him.

At half-past ten, Fishpingle and he took the path leading to the river. Fishpingle, in a very sporting coat and knickerbockers (which had been discarded by the Squire), might have been mistaken at a short distance for that potentate. He was doubtful about the prospects. The sun had risen high above the clouds and the breeze was dying down. To his astonishment, Lionel displayed indifference, saying incisively:

"I want to have a long yarn with you, old chap. If the trout aren't on the rise, so much the better."

Fishpingle stared at him keenly.

"That doesn't sound like you, Master Lionel."

"I'm not myself this morning I've a big load that I must get off my chest. We'll sit under a willow while I do it."

The trout were not feeding, as Fishpingle had predicted. There might be a nice "rise" later on. Lionel glanced up and down the

stream. Joyce was not on the "rise" either. A clump of willows was found, and the men sat down, Lionel wasted no time.

"I've had a shock, Fishpingle. I never knew till this morning that there was a crippling mortgage on this property. I never knew that father was pinched and pinching. What did he get for the shooting, eh?"

Fishpingle, who knew the exact amount, answered cautiously:

"Several hundred pounds."

"Now, sit tight! I'm going to give you a shock. I owe several hundred pounds, and I must tell father at the first decent opportunity."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Fishpingle. "Several hundreds pounds!"

"No excuses to you, you dear old man! I raced a bit out there and backed losers. I played polo. And bridge. I spent last year's leave in Kashmir. Between ourselves, I had no idea I was so dipped. The bets had to be settled on the nail; so I went to the natives. Before I started for home they dunned me. I had to tell my colonel. Before I go back these debts must be settled in full. Believing my father to be a comparatively rich man, I assured my chief that they would be. I've had a thumping good allowance and I feel this morning about as sick as they make 'em. Now—you've got it."

"Several hundred pounds," repeated Fishpingle.

"Call it five—a monkey."

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"Don't look so miserable! I can get the monkey from Cox's, my agents, but they insist upon a guarantee from my father. Of course I could go to the Jews!"

"No, no, Master Lionel. But this will upset the Squire terribly."

"Don't rub that in!"

Fishpingle got up, shaking his head dolorously and making gestures with his hands, a habit of his when distressed. At any other time, Lionel would have laughed, and with his powers of observation whetted to a finer edge in India might have deduced from these antics that here was an old friend of the family, who—by virtue of his relation to that family—had been constrained all his life to suppress speech which found expression in these very gestures. He not aware that a struggle against other habits was raging. But he knew—had he recalled it—that Fishpingle had the reputation of being what servants called "close." He saved his money. Nobody guessed how much he had saved, or what he had done with his savings. Only Fishpingle himself realised that the habit of saving had taken a grip of him. He was curiously dependent, and yet independent of the Pomfrets.

He could not envisage life apart from the family whom he had served so devotedly, but his mind could and did dwell with satisfaction upon the securely invested money which assured to him, in extremity, ease approximating to affluence. In a big way, he could be generous. He had helped the mother of Prudence Rockley

and others, but he had never touched the ever-increasing main hoard.

He said in a strangled voice:

"Don't tell the Squire, Master Lionel. He has trouble enough. I—I will give you the money gladly."

Lionel leapt up. Many surprises, during the past twenty-four hours, had prepared him for others, but this was the greatest.

"You dear old chap," he gasped, "what are you saying? Give me five hundred pounds?"

"With all my heart."

Volubly, he continued, protesting with uplifted finger against interruption. Lady Alicia Pomfret had left him a thousand pounds. He had never touched the interest on this nest egg, reinvesting it year after year. For a man in his position he was rich—*rich!* He wanted to help. It was his pleasure and his duty to help those to whom he owed everything. Lionel, for the second time that morning, felt dazed and stupid. He could understand, easily enough, Fishpingle's wish to help, but his ability to do so involved other issues. If he were rich, if, for example, the nest egg were four times its original size, why, in the name of the Sphinx, had he remained in his present position? Why hadn't he cut loose long ago, married, and set up a snug business of his own? These thoughts chased each other through his mind till Fishpingle stopped speaking. Lionel grasped his hand.

"I shall remember this all my life," he began. "But I couldn't take five hundred from you,

Fishpingle, either as a gift or a loan. And, believe me, I shall have no difficulty in raising the money with a guarantee from my father. I made a clean breast of it to you, because I thought that together we might work out the best way of breaking beastly news to him. It is beastly to find out that he has been pinching while I have been squandering. He put the thing in a phrase at breakfast. Wait! Let me get his own words. They sunk in, I can promise you. Yes; I have 'em. 'It is exasperating to be pestered for the extra inch, when you've given the ell cheerfully.' Asking for his guarantee is just that extra inch clapped on to the ell of my allowance. Now—tackle him I must. Together we'll settle the where and the when and the how. But you're a topper, the very best in the world!"

He gripped his hand fiercely.

Fishpingle accepted the situation. He perceived that here was a point of honour and principle. No Pomfret could be swerved from that. So he said simply:

"If the Squire must be told, Master Lionel, tell him to-night, after dinner, when he is sipping his port."

"Right! I will."

"You made no excuses to me, make none to him."

"Right again, you, you—sage."

Fishpingle pointed to the river. "A trout is rising just beyond that stump. He lies under it, a whopper."

"Is he? Do you know, Fishpingle, there

are moments when sport seems to me a poor substitute for other and more exciting things. You've excited me. You have come up from under your stump, and you're a whopper. And I want to throw my fly over you."

Fishpingle betrayed slight uneasiness. The young man confronting him with keen sparkling eyes had lost his look of irresolution. His firm chin stuck out aggressively, he spoke with the authority of his father.

"As you please, Master Lionel."

Lionel hesitated, picking his words, but joyously sensible that his mind had become clear again.

"I suppose," be began tentatively, "that the truth is just this. I have changed, not you dear people. I used to take certain things and persons for granted, you, for instance. It seemed to me, before I went to India, that you were part of the general scheme, a sort of keystone to the arch. I really thought that you wallowed in being our butler and general factotum."

"So I do."

"Fishpingle—that's a whopper, too. I'm not quite the innocent fool I was. Men serve others, cheerfully enough, if they're the right sort, but they do it because they have to. I never met a fellow yet, old or young, who didn't want to be on his own, if he could manage it. I supposed that you couldn't manage it. But you can. More, you could have managed it long ago. That's as clear as our water is to-day."

"I wanted to stay on."

"But why—why?"

"This is my home, Master Lionel."

"You're a wily old trout, you are. But it isn't your home. If anything happened to father and me, where would you be? You ought to have married and had some jolly kids. Nether-Applewhite is famous for its pretty girls."

Fishpingle was cornered, but his humour rescued him. He said slyly:

"Pretty, yes; but not very highly educated, Master Lionel."

"I see. We're getting to grips now. My great-grandmother, so I have heard, made a bit of a pet of you. She saw to it that you got a better education than our girls. Obviously, she intended you to profit by that and cut loose. For some inscrutable reason you didn't. If that education, old chap, made a bachelor of you, it was rather a questionable blessing, eh?"

"Perhaps."

Fishpingle's face had assumed the impenetrable mask of the highly trained English servant. Lionel glanced at him.

"Ah! You refuse to rise?"

"The trout, Master Lionel, are fairly on the feed now."

He pointed to the river, with many rippling circles upon its surface. Lionel had tact enough to say no more. He picked up his rod, sticking out of the ground beside him.

"Try a May fly," suggested Fishpingle.

Lionel did so. The pair separated, Fishpingle taking the upper reaches, above the village. Lionel fished diligently without much success, possibly because his heart was not in his work. From time to time he glanced down stream at a spot where the road shone white above the meadowsweet and rushes. Joyce Hamlin might float into sight at any minute, but she didn't. Lionel felt slightly piqued as the sun rose to the zenith. Surely, upon his first day at home, she might have come. His Colonel, a man of the world, had impressed this maxim upon his subalterns: "Women do what they like. Many of 'em undertake thankless jobs. That is because the spirit of self-sacrifice warms 'em to the core."

Was Joyce that sort of woman?

He began to think of her as a woman. A pal, so he interpreted the word, would have joined another pal. And if some definite duty kept her from him, she would have mentioned it before breakfast. Deliberately, she had let him think that she would come. And she hadn't. Some woman's reason accounted for her absence.

At luncheon Lady Pomfret joined the anglers. Fishpingle had grassed two brace of fat trout. Lionel had only one fish. The luncheon was very jolly, the sort of thing you gloated over during hot, sleepless nights in India. Below the willows, where the lobster and other good things were spread upon a snowy cloth, gurgled the weirs to the north of the village. Lionel remembered a famous run of the buckhounds

from Bramshaw Telegraph to Nether-Applewhite, an eight-mile point. The buck had swum the Avon and the big hounds followed. Half a dozen had just escaped drowning in the sluices. Lionel helped to rescue them. Behind the willows stretched the water-meadows, where he had learnt to hit snipe. He recalled the Squire's injunction: "Say to yourself—*Snipe on toast*—before you pull trigger. That'll steady your nerves." On the rising ground bordering the park, just where hill met sky, was a low belt of firs,. the best stand of that particular partridge beat, where the "guns" could take the birds as they topped the belt. Lionel had covered himself with glory at that stand, downing two in front and two behind, a notable performance in any company. And when his father had acclaimed this feat with proud insistence, Lionel had to confess that the two behind had fallen to one shot! Look, in fine, where he would, the young man could recall some happy or amusing incident of his youth, and never once, during those rosy hours, had he reflected that he was amazingly fortunate, that the lines of his life meandered, like the placid Avon, through pleasant places. As he put it to Fishpingle, he had taken things and persons for granted. He had ranked sport as a pursuit of the first magnitude.

Fishpingle, you may be sure, was asked to join the party at luncheon. Lionel, watching him, noted his good manners, or rather his unstudied ease of manner. He displayed, too, for Lady Pomfret's benefit, a remarkable fund of

Arcadian lore, that intimate knowledge of wild birds and beasts gained at first hand. Lionel decided that he talked better than the Squire, who prided himself upon his powers of speech.

Why had such a man been content to serve the Pomfrets?

After luncheon, at Fishpingle's earnest request, the anglers changed beats. Lady Pomfret accompanied her son to the upper reaches. But he showed little keenness although more fly was on the water, and the prospects of good sport much better. The mother remarked this:

"Are you tired, my dear?"

His laugh allayed that anxiety.

"Tired? I'm consumed with curiosity—that's all."

"What is biting at you?"

"Fishpingle."

"Oh!"

"Mother, read the riddle of Fishpingle to me."

She shook her head. The riddle of her son challenged attention. How greatly he had changed, this boy who had been so absurdly boyish and cut to pattern, who had accepted everything and questioned nothing. Long after he had joined his regiment, she had looked in vain for any shades of expression in him. If he liked a play or a book, it was "priceless" or "tophole." If he disliked it, one word flew from his lips like a projectile—"Tosh!" She remembered taking him to a concert, where a famous virtuoso had entranced a large audience.

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Lionel announced presently that he was bored to tears. She had said gently, "Do you think, Lionel, that is your fault or the fault of Pachmann?" And he had stared at her, startled out of his complacency but utterly misapprehending the humour and purpose of her question.

She said tranquilly:

"I can't read that riddle. I have always believed that poor Ben's father was a gentleman. Your great-grandmother may have known who he was. If she did, she carried the secret to her grave. Anyway, she educated Ben, and left him some money. She was very fond of Ben's mother, her maid. Ben became your father's servant. You know, Lionel, that men and women run in grooves. And the longer you remain in a groove, the harder it is to get out of it. Above and beyond all this remains the fact of Ben's affection for us. I have never doubted the enduring quality of that. For the rest, I know no more than you do."

"It's a mystery," declared Lionel.

After this talk, fishing really engrossed him. He returned home to tea in high spirits with five good fish in his creel. Alone in his room, changing his clothes, he remembered that he had not spoken to his mother about Joyce. And he had intended to do so, to invite her judgment upon the riddle of sex. As he pulled off his wet boots, he thought with keen anticipation of many delightful talks with her. What a gift she had of inviting confidence! And withal, a woman of exasperating reserves. It was not easy to

"get at her." Her graciousness, her tranquillity, disarmed attack.

The Squire had returned from the Bench, when Lionel sauntered into the Long Saloon. He greeted his son boisterously and listened to a recital of the day's sport. Each fish had to be hooked and played all over again. And then, as he proposed a stroll round the Home Farm, he said to Lady Pomfret:

"By the way, I have heard from Lady Margot. She will be happy to come to us after the Eton and Harrow match. That will be about three weeks from now."

"And who is Lady Margot?" asked Lionel.

The Squire chuckled:

"You wait and see, my boy. She's a dasher —a dasher."

Lionel wondered whether this was the nice little girl with a bit of money.

"What does she dash at?" he asked.

Lady Pomfret answered him:

"Everything and everybody."

The Squire, not quite satisfied, hastened to assure Lionel that the young lady was perfectly charming in face, figure, and intelligence.

Lionel's eyes twinkled, but he asked gravely enough:

"Has she money, father?"

The Squire flushed, as he answered quickly: "A hatful."

Presently, father and son took the road to the Home Farm. The Squire noticed that Lionel seemed slightly preoccupied, that he

praised perfunctorily the Shorthorns and Suffolk Punches. Being an impassioned optimist—except upon the subject of estate management—the Squire hoped that his heir's thoughts had flown away in the direction of Lady Margot. We may hazard the conjecture that Lionel was concerned rather with the difficulties of breaking "beastly" news to a generous but choleric sire.

CHAPTER VI

FISHPINGLE had given Lionel sound advice. The Squire was generally at his best after dinner, provided, of course, that the cook had done her duty. Upon this occasion, in honour of the heir, she had surpassed herself. And a glass of vintage port, after champagne, has a mellowing effect. Throughout dinner, the Squire's mercurial spirits rose steadily. Indeed, as he was sipping his port, he said, with a jolly laugh, that the Hamlins must be invited to dine —and the sooner the better, b' Jove! Parson Pomfret had tucked stout legs under his mahogany once a week. A rare old bird—that! He related anecdotes about Hamlin's predecessor. The family rat-catcher, Bob Nobs by name, sung lustily in the village choir. But he raised his stentorian voice high above Parson Pomfret's endurance. One Sunday morning, after the first hymn, the Parson addressed him sharply: "Look ye here, Bob Nobs, the angels will like your singing just as well if you don't sing so loud."

"Did you laugh, father?" asked Lionel.

The Squire was scandalised.

"Laugh, sir? Laugh in God's House!

Certainly not, but I fairly split my sides in the churchyard."

As soon as Lady Pomfret left the dining-room, the Squire said briskly :

"Another glass of wine, Lionel? It won't hurt you, my boy," and he pushed the decanter across the table.

"Thanks, no." He hesitated, flushed, and plunged.

"The truth is, sir, I do need Dutch courage. But with your permission I'll drink another glass of wine after I've told you something."

The Squire whacked the table.

"Damn it all!" he roared. "Have you told me a lie? Are you in love?"

"No," said Lionel.

The Squire's face indicated immense relief.

"Pass the wine, sir. If you think you'll need stiffening after your story, I shall do well to fortify myself before."

He poured out a bumper, and said curtly :

"Forrard! Forrard!"

"I owe five hundred pounds."

He waited for the outburst, but none came. Lionel went on hastily. He stated his case, the nature of the debt, and how it could be met by an advance from his agents, with a written guarantee from the Squire. He finished gallantly :

"I can pay up by instalments, out of my allowance. And when I join the regiment, I am reasonably sure of being made adjutant, if I work for it. The C.O. half promised that."

The Squire said solemnly:

"Will you give me your word of honour that your debts do not exceed the sum you mention?"

"Yes."

"Then fill your glass. I shall make arrangements that my bankers pay £500 into your account at Cox's. This is a first offence, and if I know you it will be the last. Your allowance is about right. You can't pay instalments out of it. Have you spoken to your dear mother of this debt?"

"Not yet."

"Then—mum's the word. I impose that condition. I can't have my blessed woman worried. Well, well, you frightened me out of my wits. From your face I made cocksure of some cursed entanglement with a petticoat."

"Father, this is most awfully generous. I—I don't know what to say. And, believe me, if I had guessed that things were a bit tight with you, I should have gone slower. When you told me about the shooting I had a fit."

"There, there, you're a good boy, and perhaps I ought to have taken such a son into my confidence. The shooting was let for a specific purpose. I haven't entertained decently since you left home. We must cut down our celebrations—what? And you must do without a clinking good horse which I know of. Why the devil doesn't Ben bring the coffee?"

"He knows I'm tackling you. I told him."

"Did you? What did the old dog say? He lifted his tongue, I'll be bound."

"He offered to give me the monkey."

"What?"

"It's a great and glorious fact. He told me he was rich."

"Rich? Rich? The old pincher! I've often wondered what Ben did with his money. Saved every bob, I expect. Were you tempted to take that monkey?"

"No."

"Good! Ben is a faithful and loyal soul."

"Isn't he more than that, father?"

"Hay? What d'ye mean, boy?"

"It seems to me that he must have the most astounding affection for us. I'm quite rattled about it. Why hasn't he gone on his own?"

But, to this question, the Squire could offer no adequate answer. He mumbled out: "Dear old Ben, we rabbited together. We had rare larks as boys." Evidently the Squire thought that this accounted for everything. Lionel thought otherwise. But he kept his reflections to himself. Alfred entered with the coffee. Fishpingle followed with the old brandy. The Squire motioned to his butler to remain in the room. It was cheery to hear his mellow tones, as he said superbly:

"A glass of wine with us, old friend. Master Lionel has told me of your offer. It was worthy of you, Ben. My hand on it."

Master and man shook hands. Fishpingle

drank his wine, was questioned and cross-questioned about his day on the river, and most graciously dismissed. Lionel thought: "This is the Old School, with a vengeance." Once more, he wondered at the change in himself, which enabled him to see so plainly that others had not changed.

When they joined Lady Pomfret, the Squire sank cosily into an immense armchair and soon dozed off. Lionel watched his mother playing "Patience." She sat upright at a small satin-wood card-table, her delicate hand poised above the cards, her head very erect. All her movements were graceful and deliberate. One could not imagine her running to catch a train. As a small boy, Lionel believed that she went to bed fully dressed, although, really, he had proof positive to the contrary. When he sat beside her, she smiled and caressed his hand. She was playing "Miss Milligan," an old favourite. Lionel lifted her hand and kissed it, as he said chaffingly:

"Toujours Mademoiselle Milligan!"

Lady Pomfret answered with perfect gravity:

"Millie is so jealous, when I forsake her."

"But I am jealous that you don't."

She swept the cards into a heap.

"There! What a mother I am!"

They began to talk, lowering their voices. But she still sat erect. It was Lionel who relaxed. And gazing at her, the son observed an air of vigilance, something new and arresting. Was she watching him, on the alert for changes

which she must discover? He whispered to her:

"Father is asleep, but you look so wide-awake."

"Perhaps I am straining my eyes to see you."

"Do I still seem small to you?"

"No, no," she smiled at him; "a colossus, my dear; you bestride my tiny world."

"Now you're humbugging me, you wicked, satirical woman. I feel very small. Call me your Mighty Atom, if you like. I say, I wish I wasn't quite such a mug where your elusive sex is concerned."

"Oh! Who is eluding you, Lionel?"

He answered without embarrassment:

"Joyce Hamlin. We used to be such good pals. And I like to pick up palship where I leave it. She half promised to join us by the river to-day. Is it true that women always do what they like, what pleases 'em best?"

She was too kind and too clever to laugh at him. Her tone, as she replied, became as serious and sincere as his.

"Some women, Lionel, and nearly all men, do what pleases them, or what they think, at the time, pleases them. Joyce, I can assure you, is not one of those. But whether you can pick up palship, as you call it, with her just where you left off is another matter entirely and quite outside my knowledge."

She paused a moment, and once more her soft fingers stroked his hand. Then she continued quietly:

"Palship, between Joyce and you, may seem simple and desirable to you. To her, probably, it presents difficulties and perplexities."

"You are fond of Joyce, mother?"

"I am very fond of her. I should be most unhappy, if unhappiness came to her."

Then she began to talk about India. Lionel told himself that his mother was, perhaps, more elusive than Joyce.

By the luck of things, during the days that followed Lionel and Joyce never met. Lionel had to go to London to replenish his wardrobe. He suggested a Salisbury tailor as good enough for an economising subaltern, but the Squire insisted upon a London snip. Lionel wondered whether Lady Margot Maltravers flitted into his father's mind when he said, "Smarten yourself up, boy. You fellows from India come back looking confoundedly provincial." Probably Lady Margot would not dash at a pair of trousers that bagged at the knee. He spent three days in town and "did" a play or two. After that the Pomfrets visited some neighbours—a many-acred squire and his wife—old friends who lived handsomely if not luxuriously. But their town house had been let, and the stables had fewer horses in them. Lionel listened to his host in the smoking-room, as he talked with Sir Geoffrey about the same eternal question of falling rents. It was pathetic to hear them, to know—as Lionel did—that such fine specimens of the race were passing—never to return. Could England spare

this particular type? Could the old landed gentry be saved? If such a devout consummation depended upon their own unaided efforts the chance of salvage might be deemed negligible. Lionel met the son of the house, an old schoolfellow, who was in the Blues. The young men talked together. They agreed solemnly that the deuce was to pay. Lionel confessed his inability to solve the problem. Tom Challoner said blandly:

"We're up against it. I'm chasing a jolly little Yank with a barrel of dollars. If I pull it off, Lionel, the old place is safe for a generation or two. That's how they've kept together the big properties in France."

Lionel replied bluntly:

"It seems a rotten way of doing it."

"Tell me some other dodge."

Lionel remained silent.

Next day the four men of the party played golf—singles in the morning and a foursome in the afternoon. Age played with Age and Youth with Youth. In the foursome, Age triumphed. During the morning, Lionel said carelessly to his companion:

"I wonder if you know Lady Margot Maltravers?"

"Know her, my dear fellow? Everybody knows La Reine Margot."

"You call her that, do you?"

"I don't Her Majesty doesn't bother with the likes of me."

Lionel tried to disguise his astonishment.

At Eton his companion had cut "a wide swath." He was in "Pop," and a member of the School XI, a bright star shining high above Lionel. And now, when they met again, Lionel was well aware that in Mrs. Grundy's shrewd eyes, and in the eyes of marriageable young women, a handsome captain of the Household Cavalry loomed larger than a Green Jacket subaltern.

"What do you mean, Tom?"

"Just what I say. She's a clever nut is Margot. She consorts with the highbrows. Know her? Why, your old governor met her in our house. She took an uncommon shine to him. He cut us all out."

"She is coming to stay with us in a fortnight."

"Is she?" He glanced sharply at Lionel. "Then look out! She'll keep her hand in with you. Her weapons don't get rusty from not usin' 'em."

"Flirtatious—eh?"

"The most abandoned coquette in London." Then seeing Lionel's eyebrows go up, he added quickly, "I'm not crabbin' her. Personally, I believe she's as cold as Greenland's icy mountains. Her vitality is mental, not physical. She's had a dozen affairs. Comes out of 'em cool as a cucumber. I predict that she'll make a big marriage—take on a Serene Highness. Pots of money! Go easy with her, old lad. Hide your feelings."

Lionel laughed.

"I shall have to, Tom."

"Eh?"

"I mean that I particularly dislike that sort of girl. But father cracks her up no end. For his sake, not mine, I *shall* hide my feelings."

"If she whistles, you'll come to heel."

Lionel returned from this visit slightly depressed, and unable to analyse his own inchoate emotions and sensibilities. His father had treated him so generously that he was positively tingling with impatience to make some return. He was in the mood, in fine, to lead a nice girl, with a bit o' money, to the altar, but not such a "dasher" as Lady Margot. Being a modest youth, he jumped to the conclusion that she would not dash at him. If she did——! Well, in that unlikely contingency he could retreat, tactically.

The sight of Joyce, whom he met by accident in the village, heartened him up. He reproached her for faithlessness in not coming to the river upon his first day at home; but she replied simply that her father had despatched her on some errand to a house at the farther end of the parish. He murmured a faint protest—

"Parson's unpaid curate, are you?"

"Father pays me, as—as your mother pays you."

"Jolly little I do for her."

Joyce laughed.

"Really? If you've grasped that, Lionel, it's well with you."

"It isn't altogether well with me. I'm a bit moithered. It would do me good to have a heart-to-heart talk with you."

"Thanks." She smiled demurely. "But why especially with me?"

"Because you're such a practical little dear."

"Am I? I wonder. Perhaps I am only practical where others are concerned."

They were walking along the high-road which follows the river for a few hundred yards. And this bit of road happened to be almost the centre of the Pomfret property. So far as eye could see every acre—good, bad and indifferent—belonged to the Squire. Lionel said eagerly:

"Just so. And as this matter concerns me, you could give sound advice, couldn't you?"

Obviously he firmly believed her to be wholly unconcerned in his affairs. And she wasn't. Her quickening pulses told her that. But she said lightly:

"I could try. What bothers you?"

He burst into fluent speech. Ought he to chuck the army? His father had made a jest of it, but—facing disagreeable facts—was it not his duty to begin some sort of preparatory work to fit himself for a job he knew nothing about? Fellows like Bonsor were simply hopelessly out of date. Take the Home Farm—the Squire's joy and pride. It was run at a loss. And all the tenant farmers needed "binging up." The old order was doomed if it persisted in running things on old, worn-out lines. All this, and much more, he poured into Joyce's attentive and sympathetic ears. When he paused for a second, she said quietly:

"What does Sir Geoffrey say?"

He laughed derisively.

"Father? I can't talk with him about this. And, between ourselves, how can he talk with me, being the man he is? Every word I've said to you is an indictment of his policy and management. And I can't talk with mother, either, because any criticism of his methods would hurt her horribly. I did talk to Tom Challoner. We've been stayin' with 'em. Tom is in the same tight place, but he's found a way out."

"Captain Challoner must be cleverer than I gave him credit for. What is his way?"

"Dishonourable marriage."

"Oh-h-h!"

"All the same, his way doesn't seem dishonourable to him. And from his point of view, mind you, if he marries money to save the old place it *is* a sacrifice. But he doesn't think of the girl at all."

"Do men think of the girl, as a rule?"

Something in her soft voice arrested his attention. He looked at her. Her cheeks were pinker than usual. That, however, might be due to a warm day and exercise.

"Are you cynical about men?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, no. But I suppose—I think——"

"Come on! Heart-to-heart, Joyce. No skrimshanking!"

"I don't know many men. I've met Captain Challoner. I've read about men like him. He's a type, isn't he? He might want a girl, either

for herself or her money, but he wouldn't ask himself if he could make her happy and contented, would he?"

Lionel was too busy with his own affairs to throw pebbles at a pal. He professed ignorance. Tom Challoner was a good sort. Any girl would have an easy time with him.

"Some of us want more than that."

She stopped, smiling pleasantly. Her destination, a small cottage, was reached. Lionel offered to wait for her.

"I shall be busy for an hour at least."

He grumbled, unwilling to go.

"What are you doing in there?"

"The mother of five children is in bed with a sixth. I play housemaid and nurse. We shall meet to-night. Father and I dine with you."

"Yes, I know. Joyce, you must wear your prettiest frock. Have you a very pretty frock?"

"I think so. I made it myself."

She nodded and vanished.

Walking on, Lionel remembered that he had asked for her advice, but somehow he had not got it.

That afternoon he rode with the Squire. Father and son were very friendly together, although each shrank from discussion of subjects next his heart. This intercourse, so intimate—up to a point—revealed the Squire in a new light. Really the Squire revealed himself, accepting his boy, at long last, as man and comrade. To his dismay, however, Lionel did not

share his feelings about the family heirlooms. Sir Geoffrey approached them warily, sincerely anxious to know where an up-to-date young soldier stood.

"We have some valuable stuff in the old house," he said.

"Have we?" Lionel asked.

"The Sir Joshua, for instance. With your consent, my boy, it might be sold."

"Would it fetch much?"

"Possibly twenty thousand, if the right people were bidding."

Lionel whistled. Then he said, tentatively;

"I love the picture, but I'd let it go gladly if the mortgage could be diminished by that big sum, or——"

"Or?"

"If the money could be laid out on the estate. Fishpingle says——"

"Don't quote old Ben to me, boy. He transmits my ideas. Well, well, you surprise me. I have regarded our heirlooms as sacred."

"But the mortgage, father?"

"Tchah! You find that nice little girl. Snug dowries have cancelled many a mortgage."

"Yes; that is what Tom Challoner says."

The dinner was pleasant enough. Squire and Parson tacitly avoided subjects upon which they might differ. Joyce looked charming in the simple frock of her own making. Some tennis was arranged. Hamlin mentioned that his eldest son was coming home and bringing with

him a friend. Of this friend, Joyce, somewhat to Lionel's chagrin, spoke with enthusiasm. He had distinguished himself at Cambridge, was now a Fellow of his college, and regarded as a rising chemist.

"A chemist?" exclaimed Lionel.

"Not a druggist. His line is coal-tar products. He says the Germans have that field almost to themselves, but he is digging deep into it. Mr. Moxon has imagination. That is what is wanted in an inventor."

"Moxon?" said the Squire. "Let me see. One of the Moxons of Wooton?"

Hamlin answered drily:

"I don't think so. Moxon's father, I believe, made a fortune in jute."

"What is jute?" asked Lady Pomfret.

Hamlin explained. Moxon *père* had begun life sweeping out an office in Dundee. Moxon *fils* might end—anywhere. Already he was quite independent of a rich father.

"Very creditable," said the Squire majestically. Everybody present knew that Sir Geoffrey would have shown much greater interest in a Moxon of Wooton. Nevertheless, he continued in the same tone, with a sweeping gesture:

"I am told that our tennis courts are in order. We shall be delighted to see your young people using them. Possibly Mr. Moxon has studied artificial fertilisers. If so, I shall be happy to have a word with him."

Hamlin's face stiffened. Lionel could read his thoughts. The Squire was not above accepting

a tip from the son of a jùte-manufacturer. Otherwise he might be regarded as an outsider. And, struggle as he did against inherited prejudices, Lionel, in his heart, was unable to regard this distinguished chemist as a social equal. Joyce, he reflected, could be reckoned as a jolly little sister. Joyce, evidently, had been swept off her feet by young Moxon. Suppose, too, that Moxon, a clever chap, had been captivated by her? Could he attend their wedding with satisfaction? Most emphatically—no! He did not ask himself what his feelings would be if Tom Challoner were leading Joyce to the altar.

After dinner a round game was played, so Lionel had no chance of getting Joyce alone. The guests left early, and the Squire said, with a sigh of relief:

"That's well over. Hamlin drank lemonade. Depend upon it, lemonade irrigates his perversity. Beastly sour stuff! Joyce seems to like this jute-manufacturer's son. We may have a wedding in the village. Very suitable match."

Lady Pomfret nodded. She observed, out of the corner of her eye, that her son was pulling savagely at a small moustache.

Lionel played one game of billiards with his father, and was handsomely beaten. Then he went to bed, but not to sleep. He tossed uneasily between his lavender-scented sheets, growing more and more irritable. Had Joyce gone out of his life? In India, upon a night much warmer than this, he had lain awake thinking of jolly hours spent alone with Joyce.

They would fish and ride together, with lashin's of tennis. Did she avoid him purposely? In the old days, she popped in and out of the Hall like a kitten. Was she waiting now to be asked formally to come to luncheon or tea? Could it be possible that she was engaged to this chemist? No, no, Hamlin was the last man to countenance a secret engagement; and Joyce was incapable of keeping a fact of such importance from her father. Moxon—confound him! —and Joyce were not engaged, but they might be in a few days or so.

He got out of bed, lit a pipe, and cooled himself by the open window. A nightingale trilled a few notes, the broken song of late June. Lionel was in no sentimental mood. The nightingale singing to his mate provoked an absurd image of Moxon talking to Joyce about coal-tar products.

He cursed Moxon; and ordered the nightingale to "shut up."

Then he laughed himself into a happier humour. Why should he care? Ten to one, he had found a mare's nest. Girls were not enthusiastic about fellows they were fond of. Rather the contrary! Six to four Moxon was engaged to some freckle-faced lassie in Dundee. He felt remorse when the nightingale stopped singing. He leaned far out of the window and said clearly:

"I'm sorry, old chap; you go on singing to your missus."

But the nightingale was huffed—and didn't.

Owls hooted and hunted through the darkness. Male and female hunted together; for the first brood, now feathering nicely, were hatching out the second lot of eggs with their soft, warm little bodies. From the shrubberies came the hoarse cry of the nightjar, who moves the babies each night to a different nursery. Lionel felt more at ease in mind and body. The night was so still that he could just hear the rumble of a distant train speeding towards Salisbury. He thought of the people in the train, rushing on to adventures and misadventures, to new joys and old sorrows. Pace—progress—change! What a trinity!

He found himself yawning. He was almost dozing. The sand from the suburbs of slumber tingled in his eyes. The nightingale, still silent, may have heard his last words just audible to the sensitive ear:

"Good night, you jolly old world."

CHAPTER VII

MANY persons, profoundly ignorant of lives other than their own, believe that country gentlemen have easy billets. They read of big "shoots" with no understanding of the anxieties involved. They may be surprised to learn that often the host carries a stick instead of a gun. Indeed a "battue" (a favourite word amongst journalists) exacts as careful generalship as a battle. The same people imagine fox-hunting to be plain sailing over a grass country and the successful training of hounds—a pastime. A glance at "Beckford" would enlighten them. But, apart from sport, which engrosses less time on the part of a big land-owner than is popularly supposed, there remain the Bench, the County Council, the District Council, the Parish Council, and innumerable petty claims upon the leisure of men like Sir Geoffrey Pomfret. He worked hard all the year round, and much of that work was done gratuitously for the welfare of others.

Lionel had always been aware of this. Many a "shoot," many a hunt had the Squire cheerfully given up in the prosecution of county and parochial duties. What Lionel did not know, what he soon learnt on his return from India, was that his father actually neglected his own

affairs in the public interest. Fishpingle, fortunately, had filled the breach. And the Squire remained, possibly, the only man upon his estates who was not cognisant of the fact.

But Lionel was quite unable to measure the extent of Fishpingle's influence and power because the dear old chap effaced himself. Lionel smoked many pipes with him, and, day by day, he marvelled at Fishpingle's ability and devotion. He might have made a mark anywhere. Why had he remained a butler?

During the fortnight which elapsed before the arrival of the "dasher," Lionel saw Joyce nearly every afternoon, but rarely alone. She played tennis with him, for Lionel and she were a match for Hamlin's eldest son and Moxon. Between the sets she would chatter unconcernedly. It jumped to the eye that Moxon was paying her attention. And Lionel couldn't help liking Moxon, although he described the hounds, when they visited the kennels, as "a nice lot of dogs wagging their tails." Moxon, however, talked admirably, and Joyce listened with exasperating deference. He had brought his motor to the Vicarage, and appeared to be a man of ample means. When Lionel said as much to the Squire, that hypercritic perpetrated a joke.

"If his means are as large as his ends, he must be very rich."

This was in allusion to Moxon's hands and feet, points about which the Squire was particular. But he, too, liked Moxon, who proved

to be "knowledgable" about fertilisers and intensive culture, and amiably willing to impart information whenever he was asked for it.' Moreover, the possibility of any wedding in Nether-Applewhite brought out all that was best in the Squire. He kept on repeating to Lionel:

"A very suitable match. I hope it will come about."

"I don't," said Lionel, spurred to protest by this repetition. "Joyce might do better than Moxon. He's clever as he can stick, and not a bad chap, but—well, he's Moxon. And I should think his people in Dundee are as sticky as their own marmalade."

"I dare say. I repeat again—a very suitable match for Joyce. Her father is sticky. Now don't argue with me, Lionel! It is nothing to us whom Joyce marries."

He glanced keenly at his son, watching the effect of this sly thrust. Lionel riposted imperturbably:

"That won't do, father, coming from you. Everybody knows what a matchmaker you are. And, by the way, that reminds me. Alfred confided to me that he wanted to marry Prudence, and that you objected. Can't you see your way to withdraw your objection."

"Most certainly not. Bless my soul! What are we coming to? I settled that affair with Ben before you came home. I sent a message to the little baggage through Ben. No mutiny in my house."

"But, father, if they really love each other, poor dears!"

"Love! Tchah! I tell you this, boy, any healthy young man can love a dozen young women."

"All at once, father?"

"You know what I mean. This 'sighing and yearning and clinging and burning' for one person of the opposite sex is ridiculous—preposterous."

"I see. If you hadn't captured mother, any other young woman would have done just as well."

This disarmed the Squire. He laughed heartily and clapped Lionel on the shoulder.

"That was a good 'un, my boy. Dammy! you stuck me through the heart. But I wasn't speaking of the quality. It doesn't do to say it in these democratic times, but, between you and me, our Wiltshire labourers are not far removed from animals. I speak of what I know."

"And whose fault is that?"

The Squire frowned. It was confounding that his son should ask such questions. He said sharply:

"Have you been talking with Hamlin?"

"I talk with Tom, Dick, and Harry. I want to know what people really think. If it irritates you, father, to discuss the conditions in our own county, I'll shut up."

The Squire fumed a little, but he was not ill-pleased. The boy expressed himself well and modestly. And he had inherited from his dear

mother an ironical humour which tickled him. Whether, also, he had inherited her tact remained to be seen.

"Whose fault is it?" he repeated slowly. "That's a bit of a stumper, boy. One can't answer a big question like that—off hand."

"Is it their fault? A lot of 'em herd together like animals."

"Not on my property, Lionel."

"I know. You've been awfully decent about that, but elsewhere. Within a radius of ten miles, we both know of conditions that beat the London slums. Is that their fault?"

"No."

"Things are changing slowly for the better, but why can't they be speeded up? If our labourers could be made more intelligent, we should profit as much as they. You've looked after their bodies jolly well. You believe in eugenics."

"I do, b' Jove! I don't believe in clap-trap education, never did. Our old gaffers, who signed their names with their thumbs, did a better day's work than their half-educated sons."

Lionel laughed.

"Father, I can roll you in the dust. I hate to do it."

"Do it, if you can, you young rascal. I defy you!"

He laughed, more loudly than Lionel.

"How about Fishpingle?"

"Ben? What the doose has he got to do with it?"

"He has been a tower of strength to you, simply because he is educated. He shines brighter than Bonsor. Where would you be without him?"

"Um! You think you've downed me, boy. You quite forget that Ben is the exception that proves the rule. I've trained Ben. What he knows he's got from me, b' Jove! And I'll admit that because his confounded memory happens to be better than mine he is able, once in a while, to get the upper hand by quoting me against myself. That's a little trick of his which always exasperates me. Ben has understudied me, so to speak, to his own advantage and mine. He could take Bonsor's place, and I sometimes think I shall let him have it. But, I repeat, Ben is exceptional. As to that, everybody knows that real ability always pushes itself out of the ruck. And—there it is! With the ruck, you can do so little, practically nothing—nothing. If you have finished your cigar, we'll join your mother."

Lionel followed his sire into the Long Saloon. Lady Pomfret was playing "Patience" as usual. Lionel decided that he must do the same. His jolly old father couldn't be pressed, as many a young man had discovered out hunting, when the Squire carried a Master's horn. "Don't ride in my pocket, sir," he would roar out. "Am I hunting hounds or are you?"

But, happily, they could talk together without much heat—a significant sign. What encouraged the young man to persevere was the conviction

that the Squire desired, heart and soul, the true welfare of his people. All of them were well housed, well fed, medically supervised—in a word, "protected" against their own ignorance. And Lionel's ever-increasing conviction that such protection defeated its honest aims was instinctive rather than practical. He had no cut-and-dried scheme of reconstruction to offer to his father, or anybody else. His disabilities oppressed him. As a matter of fact, he did talk with Hamlin, and came away from such talks much discouraged. Hamlin was iconoclastic by temperament and training, a John Knox of a fellow! He advocated sweeping reforms, and after such a clear-up as he demanded Lionel wondered vaguely what would be left. The squires of England might be scrapped!

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At the end of the week Moxon left. If he said anything to Joyce before his departure, the maid kept it to herself. Her friendly aloofness went on puzzling Lionel. She seemed the same jolly pal, but she wasn't. Something, or somebody, stood between them. It might be Moxon; it might be the Parson, who certainly gave his unpaid curate plenty of work. The fact that she was at work, when he was fishing, riding, and playing golf or tennis, took some zest from these amusements. He said frankly to the Parson:

"Why can't Joyce play about with me, as she used to?"

Hamlin answered rather grimly:

"Joyce hasn't stood still."

As he spoke he eyed Lionel sharply, so sharply that the young man felt uncomfortable. Hamlin went on in a very uncompromising tone:

"I give my daughter a free hand, Lionel. I trust her absolutely."

"But, of course, sir."

"There is no 'of course' about it. She happens to have earned that trust. 'Playing about with you' sounds harmless enough, and I trust you unreservedly, too; but tongues will wag in country villages, and I don't want them wagging about my girl. That's all"

Lionel accepted this as satisfactory. The Parson had given a hint to Joyce. He smiled pleasantly, so pleasantly that the Parson took his arm and pressed it.

"You're a good fellow, Lionel, but rather dense"

"Thank you, sir. Have another shot."

All the grimness went out of Hamlin's voice, as he explained:

"You are only dense, like so many worthy folk, where others are concerned. When I prepared you for confirmation, when we read together before you went up for Sandhurst, I discovered joyfully your modesty. Don't squirm! We'll have this out. You're not the swaggering sort. I've never caught you preening yourself. *It is* quite likely that you are unaware of your attractiveness."

Lionel did squirm, but the Parson held him tightly.

"Oh, I say, sir——!"

"More—you exercise the faculties that have been well exercised already. I didn't get my 'blue' that way. At first I was a hopeless duffer at cricket. I believed that I wasn't built for cricket. But something inside me bit at my vitals, and I went to work with my brains—and after much tribulation I got there."

"By Jove! you did!"

"Well, suppose you profit by my experience. Try harder to measure your own potentialities. Joyce has lost her mother. I try, very ineffectively, to take her place. In a word, Lionel, playing about with Joyce may be fun for you, regarding her as you do almost as a sister, but it might be disastrous for her. What it has cost me to say this you may realise when you have a daughter of your own."

"Thank you, sir," said Lionel, in a different tone.

This talk with a man who detested mere chatter opened Lionel's eyes. Was it possible that little Joyce could care for him in another way?

It is humorous to reflect that Hamlin—acting according to his lights—had brought about the one consummation he wished to avoid. He had underrated Lionel's modesty, and indicated possibilities which hitherto had been beyond the young fellow's horizon. Probably, Mrs. Hamlin—had she been alive—would have handled the same subject differently. The mere idea that Joyce might regard him other than as a pal

made Lionel think of her, tenderly and chivalrously, as a woman abundantly equipped to inspire a warmer sentiment than friendship. But when he put the straight question to his inner consciousness: "Am I in love?" he couldn't answer it.

But he obeyed the letter of the Parson's injunction. He made no further effort to secure those pleasant heart-to-heart talks which he had missed so confoundedly. And here again—as the judicious will agree—he was playing Cupid's game. Joyce felt piqued by the subtle change in him. She wondered if she had offended him.

We are at liberty to divulge one secret. Moxon had proposed. And she had refused him. Possibly, the Parson divined the reason. As a rule, penniless daughters of poor clergymen do not say "No" to eligible young men, unless their affections are otherwisely engaged. It is certain that Joyce—with her old-fashioned upbringing—was incapable of frankly admitting to herself that she loved a man whose feelings were agreeably fraternal. If, in maiden meditation, she dared to envisage Lionel as a lover, it is equally certain that she shrank, tremblingly, from the issues involved. Love passages with Sir Geoffrey Pomfret's son and heir meant—ructions.

Moxon behaved with discretion and cleverness. He went away with the Parson's permission to return after a decent interval. He perceived that he had "rushed" Joyce, and apologised so handsomely that she felt absurdly

sorry for him, and inclined to blame herself. Indeed, having said "No" with unmistakable emphasis, she spent a sleepless but not altogether disagreeable night in speculating what her future might have been had she said "Yes."

We have observed that Lionel obeyed the letter of the Parson's injunction. It was not so easy to obey the spirit, unless he kept away from the young lady altogether. When they did meet, he was consumed by curiosity and excitement. He tried to read the virgin page, so immaculate to his eye. And then, through Fishpingle—a confirmed gossip about such affairs,—he learnt of poor Moxon's rejection. Prudence pumped the facts out of the bouncing parlourmaid at the Vicarage.

"He means to try again," said Fishpingle.

"Does he? I wonder why she refused him."

Fishpingle remained exasperatingly silent.

It is significant that Lionel did not pass on this bit of gossip either to the Squire or his mother. When he next met Joyce, he decided that she looked a thought pale. Did this lack of colour indicate vigils? Why on earth couldn't she confide in him? What would account adequately for her silence? A nice regard for poor Moxon, or——! He blushed as he confronted the more obvious hypothesis.

Under such circumstances, conversation, between an ingenuous pair, is likely to become artificial and constrained. They met and parted acutely ill at ease. The curare poison into which Cupid dips his darts paralyses action

and stimulates sensation. They began to suffer abominably. Of the two, Lionel may have endured sharper pangs, because Joyce had her work, whereas time hung heavily upon his hands. Neither, as yet, had squarely faced the fact that they were in love.

Cupid laughed, as he fashioned more darts.

Meanwhile the Squire's bankers had paid £500 into Lionel's account at Cox's. The actual payment of the money, promptly despatched to settle his debts, sent a fresh tidal wave of gratitude through Lionel's mind. And he felt mighty uncomfortable when the importunate Bonsor clamoured, in his presence, for grants in aid of the Home Farm. On top of this came disconcerting news. Three young men in Nether-Applewhite announced their intention of emigrating. Upon many neighbouring estates depopulation was causing anxiety to farmers and landowners. The Squire was very hot about it, and sent his son with powers plenipotentiary to deal with the deserters. Lionel knew them well. They played cricket and were sober, respectable fellows, in the prescient eyes of the Squire potential fathers of large families. To lose them would be a disaster.

Lionel interviewed the Mucklows upon the Sunday preceding Lady Margot's arrival.

He tried chaff first, and then serious remonstrance. The youngest of the three, so Lionel remembered, had announced his wish of becoming a gamekeeper, a calling for which he had special aptitudes. Lionel said to him :

"I thought, George, you wanted to be a keeper?"

George, somewhat to the consternation of his elder brethren, replied with a grin:

"Lard love 'ee, Master Lionel, it looks, seemin'ly, as if keepers an' game-preservin' won't last another ten years. Where would I be then?"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Lionel.

George accepted this deferentially, adding, as if in excuse:

"I'd a mind to be a policeman, I had, bein'—so to speak—so fine a figger of a man, but policemen bain't wanted in Nether-Applewhite."

"You say that as if you regretted it."

"'Tis tarnation dull here, Master Lionel."

An interminable discussion followed. The young men pursued many avocations, harvesting, cutting poles, bark-stripping, hurdling, and thatching. Month in and month out each could earn about eighteen shillings a week, a good wage in Wiltshire. They lived with their parents, but helped with the rent and paid board and lodging. So far as Lionel could gather, they were seeking change and amusement—livelier times.

"You fellows won't get that in Canada."

Western Canada had been mentioned as their future home.

"Ah-h-h! Have 'ee bin back there, Master Lionel?"

"No, but I know something about it. When the winter sets in, fifty degrees of frost, and you

find yourselves frostbitten and forty miles from a doctor, you'll be thinking of this snug cottage."

But none of them budged from his determination to leave England. George, who might be reckoned the fool of the family, said finally:

"Us do hear tell there be no quality over there. Every tub a-standin' on it's own bottom."

"You'll be standing on your head, George."

Lionel returned to his father, rather discomfited. The Squire frowned, as he listened to his son's report.

"I'll see 'em," he declared. "Hounds that run riot must be rated."

"You told me to use tact."

Eventually, Fishpingle saw the brethren and persuaded them to remain in Nether-Applewhite. He elicited the truth. Two of the brothers were engaged to be married and wanted cottages. Bonsor had told them to remain single, because no cottages were vacant. Fishpingle promised them new cottages, whereat the Squire grumbled and growled. He said to Lionel:

"Where is the money to come from?"

Lionel winced, thinking of the draft on its way to India. The Squire tapped him on the shoulder—

"Lionel, my boy, that nice little girl with something in her stocking is house-warming in my heart."

Lionel nodded, not too enthusiastically.

The Squire was so full of his plan for

cancelling the family mortgage and rebuying the land sold by his grandfather that he could not keep it from Fishpingle. As a rule they spent an hour together each morning, going over estate accounts which, properly considered, were Bonsor's business. Fishpingle, however, had kept such accounts for fifteen years, burning much midnight oil over them.

"Ben," said the Squire, "that little lady is coming to us next week."

"You mean Lady Margot, Sir Geoffrey."

"I do. What d'ye think of her—hay?"

"Very urban, Sir Geoffrey."

"What d'ye call her? Urban? God bless my soul! What words you use! Where d'ye get your vocabulary from?"

Fishpingle answered deprecatingly:

"From you, Sir Geoffrey, from my lady, and from the dictionary."

"Urban—eh? Well, why not? When you and I were her age, we liked London—what? I know I did. And I should like to see Master Lionel in Parliament. Between ourselves, Ben, I am hoping and praying that Master Lionel and Lady Margot will take a shine to each other. She liked his photograph, b' Jove? And if I do say it, there isn't a nicer young fellow in England. You're starin' at me like an owl. Can't you say something?"

"I took the liberty of looking Lady Margot up in the Peerage."

"Did you? Well, you found a thumpin' good pedigree. No better stock anywhere."

"What there is of it, Sir Geoffrey."

"Hay."

Fishpingle rose slowly, crossed the room to the bookcase and took down his "Burke." The Squire watched him with impatience.

"Your slow ways irritate me. Where did ye get that Peerage?"

"I bought it, Sir Geoffrey."

Fishpingle opened the big book, and put on his spectacles. Having found the page, entitled "Beaumanoir," he pushed the volume across to the Squire, who adjusted his pince-nez.

"Not much stock left," said Fishpingle.

The Squire frowned, running his forefinger up the page.

"You've been talking to my lady," he snapped out.

"No, Sir Geoffrey."

"Then she's been talking to you."

"Not about the Maltravers family."

"Um! The stock has worn thin, but what of it—what of it? An infusion of fresh, healthy blood is needed." He closed the Peerage with a bang. "Take the damned book away!" Fishpingle replaced it, and came back. "Sit ye down, man." Fishpingle obeyed. "I take you unreservedly into my confidence." Fishpingle bowed solemnly. "I want to bring about this match. As I told my lady—no pressure. It must come about naturally. I haven't asked anybody to meet Lady Margot here. The young people will be thrown together, and there you are!"

Fishpingle remained obstinately silent. The Squire glared at him.

"You don't share my wish, you crusty old dog? What's in your mind? Speak out freely!"

"I was thinking, Sir Geoffrey, of young Lord Fordingbridge."

"Then your wits are wool-gathering. He married a year ago, and what a marriage, b' Jove! His agent's daughter."

"A fortnight ago," said Fishpingle, with a faint smile, "her ladyship was safely delivered of twin sons. His lordship and his lordship's father were only sons. That stock had worn thin."

Light came to the Squire and blazed in his blue eyes.

"I take you, Ben, I take you. I suppose, if you had your way, you'd arrange a marriage between my son and a prolific milkmaid."

"It would be sound eugenics."

"Damn eugenics! I'd sooner see my boy dead in his coffin than marrying out of his own class. What d'ye say to that?"

"Nothing, Sir Geoffrey. What wine will you drink to-night?"

"Champagne," roared the Squire, getting up. "I shall need a bottle to myself after this."

"Certainly, Sir Geoffrey."

CHAPTER VIII

LEAVING Fishpingle, the Squire walked down the passage which led past the pantry into the housekeeper's room, where he knew he would find his wife. During the hour when he did accounts with his butler, Lady Pomfret passed the same time with housekeeper and cook. The Squire was so ruffled, as he stumped down the passage, that he broke one of his own inviolate rules, and called out "Mary, Mary," as if he were shouting for a housemaid. Lady Pomfret's clear tones came back. "I am here, Geoffrey." Her smile, as she answered him, delighted the cook, an old and privileged retainer. It said so unmistakably: "Poor dear man! He can't help it. When he gets excited he wants—*me*." The cook's answering smile was broader but as easily read by Lady Pomfret, who interpreted it thus: "Yes, my lady, the men are all alike, we have to drop our jobs, when they need—*us*."

Sir Geoffrey appeared, red of face, and congested of eye, but he minded his manners.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mowland. How are you? As well and hearty as ever, I hope?"

The cook curtsied. She was one of his own people. The Squire's civilities were greatly

appreciated in the "room" and in the servant's hall. He knew the names of everybody, high and low, in his establishment, and could talk familiarly with a scullery-maid, asking politely after her brothers and sisters, and sure to pay her a compliment if her cheeks were sufficiently rosy. In his own dining-room, were the potatoes not to his liking, he might instruct Fishpingle to throw them at Mrs. Mowland's head, but such extravagance of behaviour endeared him to his household. The autocrat was so very human. He spoke, not quite so pleasantly, to his wife:

"Mary, my dear, I want a word with you."

"Certainly, Geoffrey. In your own room, I suppose?"

"In my own room."

He led the way to the library, which contained a vast number of calf-bound volumes which nobody disturbed. Here, above the bookcases, hung portraits of favourite hunters and hounds. Between them grinned the masks of half a dozen foxes, and on the mantel-shelf might be seen two hunting-horns brilliantly polished by Alfred, although much dented. The Squire found a chair for Lady Pomfret, but remained standing.

"Mary, I am upset."

"Dear Geoffrey, I am so sorry. What has upset you?"

"Ben."

"Dear me! Not wilfully, I am sure."

"Don't be too sure," he snapped out. "Ben

presumes upon my friendship and forbearance. I was fool enough to take him into my confidence this morning."

"In my humble opinion that is not a foolish thing to do."

"Isn't it, b' Jove! You wait. I spoke to him of our little plan, our little match-making plan."

Lady Pomfret smiled ironically. The use of the possessive pronoun tickled her humour. He made so sure that his little plan was hers. And, really, that was very sweet of him. The Squire saw no derision in her smile; he was too much perturbed.

"Ah! What did Ben say?"

The Squire repeated what Ben had said, with pardonable accretions. Lady Pomfret remained perfectly calm. He continued vehemently:

"Ben has the impudence to disapprove. He would like to see Lionel marrying a milkmaid."

"Surely he never said that?"

"I think he said it, or I said it. No matter! He flung at my head that ignominious marriage of young Fordingbridge."

"Was it ignominious? The end—twins—seems to have justified the means."

"Tchah! Well, Mary, you think as I do, bless you! so I shan't ask for your opinion. Ben has great influence with Lionel."

"Has he?"

"Of course he has. Ben—damn him!—I beg your pardon, Mary!—might conceivably queer our pitch."

"Oh dear, no!"

"You reassure me. But you know, Mary, I have always had an odd presentiment that Lionel might stick a knife into me."

Lady Pomfret lost her composure for an instant. She said emphatically:

"That presentiment is preposterous."

The Squire continued at an easier pace, ambling forward to his objective.

"I mean this, my dear. We know our dear Lionel. He is a good boy, a nice affectionate son——"

"That and much more," murmured the mother.

"I quite agree, but I am not blind to his—a—limitations. He talks with Tom, Dick, and Harry. I have his word for it. He talks with that pestilent parson."

Lady Pomfret protested. Protest, she was well aware, might be wasted, but, being the woman she was, she had to make it.

"Mr. Hamlin is not pestilent. He is like you——"

"What?"

"He has the courage to speak his opinions regardless of the effect produced on his listeners."

"Um! You accuse me of that? I am astonished. I flatter myself that I don't impose my opinions upon others. However, let that pass. Where was I? Yes, yes, pray don't interrupt me for a minute! Lionel is too absorbent, a bit of a chameleon, what? He likes to hear both sides. I don't blame him, but there it is. Having

heard both sides, poor boy! he gets rather dazed. Conditions in our rural districts daze him—and no wonder. He asks where he is?"

"Surely you can tell him." She smiled again.

"I'm dashed if I can. That's the trouble. He's a weathercock out of order. And he can't, as yet, get at the root of things. He failed with those Mucklows. It is humiliating to reflect that Ben found out the trouble at once, and put it right. I gave the boy a free hand. Why didn't he dig out the truth? Now, I've lost my point. I was heading for what?"

"You said something absurd about Lionel sticking a knife into you."

"So I did. Lionel, with his too loose ideas—— You know, Mary, the army is not what it was in my time. Even in good regiments you'll find a taint of demagogy, the trail of the serpent. Have I lost my point again? No. Lionel wrote regularly to little Joyce Hamlin. She wrote to him. She's a deuced pretty girl."

"So Mr. Moxon thought."

"I hope Moxon will get her. But—this is my point—I want to hammer it well home—Lionel might fall in love with just such a bread-and-butter miss as Joyce."

"That doesn't describe the child quite fairly, Geoffrey."

"Well, well, you know what I m driving at. It is his duty not to marry for money, but to find a nice girl with money. There are plenty of 'em. God forbid that I should force Lady Margot

down his throat! It is quite likely she won't cotton to him——"

"Or he to her?"

"As to that, I am not alarmed. You charmers," he smiled genially at her, "lead us poor fellows where you will. Practically, Mary, you proposed to me."

"I didn't."

"You lured me on and on, you witch! If this little lady wants Lionel, she'll lure him on. I don't worry about that. He gave me his word that he was heart-whole."

"Then he is, or was, when he said so."

"Was—was? You don't think——?"

"I think lots of things. I know very little. Till quite lately Lionel has been transparently friendly with Joyce and she with him. During the past few days I have noticed a slight change in him. I have hardly set eyes on her. He is a trifle absent-minded with me, and not quite so jolly. I am sure of this—he shares your anxieties. He would like to help you, but cannot find a way. He did just hint to me that he would leave the army, if he knew enough to take Bonsor's place."

"Rubbish! I have indicated the way for him, a broad and easy path. Well, I have a lot to do, but I had to have this chat with you. You are sure of Ben's loyalty—hay?"

Her eyes did not meet his, but she answered quietly:

"I am sure that dear Ben has the true interests of all of us next his heart."

He paused at the door, smiling at her.

"I am off to the Home Farm. I shall pass through the rose garden, and I shall pick the best rose for you. Where is Lionel?"

"I don't know."

Lionel happened to be at the Vicarage.

He had definitely made up his mind that he could say to Joyce what he kept from his own mother and father, and he knew, instinctively, that her advice, at such a moment, would help him enormously. He could, it is true, have laid his case before the Parson, a sound adviser, but he shrank from such an ordeal. Hamlin was too brutally outspoken. To place his perplexities before him meant listening to a one-sided indictment of landed gentry in general and the Squire in particular.

Chance, so often complaisant to lovers, ordained that Lionel should find Joyce alone. The Parson was attending a Diocesan Conference in Salisbury, and his eldest son had accompanied him. Also, it happened to be raining; so Joyce received Lionel in her own den, where she kept a lathe, a sewing-machine, rolls of flannel and longcloth, many books, and her collections of eggs and butterflies. Lionel was invited to sit down and light his pipe.

"This is like old times," he remarked.

"Isn't it?"

While he was filling his pipe, she went on with her sewing. He looked at her small, capable hands and deft fingers, her workmanlike kit, and

the shining coils of her brown hair, a shade lighter than her eyes.

Then he plunged into his troubles.

"We had a talk the other day, Joyce, but I never discovered till I was walking home that I had asked for your advice and never got it. I'm here to get it this morning."

Unconsciously, thinking of the Parson's injunctions, he laid stress upon this last sentence. It was plain to the girl that he had not come for anything else. He went on hurriedly.

"I owe my father five hundred pounds. This is strictly between ourselves. I got into debt to that tune, and he paid up like a trump. He never slated me at all. Mother doesn't know. Now, I'll say to you that I should have kept out of debt, if I had even suspected that he was really hard up. I swear that, Joyce."

"You needn't. I am sure of it."

"And I'll tell you something else. Generous and jolly as he's been, I do feel sore and hurt because he couldn't take me into his confidence. Once more, most strictly between ourselves," she nodded, "there's a big mortgage on the property, a plaster applied by my great-grandfather. Perhaps you knew it."

She answered simply:

"I thought everybody knew it. I'm sure our parlourmaid does."

"Just so. Well, I didn't know. I've been treated like a child."

She tried to console him.

"But, Lionel, the old school are like that.

They never tell their nearest and dearest what most intimately concerns them. Look at those Ocknell girls." (The Ocknell estate marched with the Pomfret property.) "They were given every advantage except those which teach women to earn a living. They hunted, they wore pretty frocks, and had a gorgeous time, till their father died. The son has the property, heavily mortgaged, and the girls have seventy-five pounds a year apiece."

"Beastly for them!"

"I should think so. If misery loves company, you are not alone."

The sympathy in her voice moved him to further confidence.

"Now, what bothers me is: how can I repay my father? If I'd known what I know to-day, when I left Eton, horses wouldn't have dragged me into the army, although soldiering suits me down to the ground. As a soldier I'm an encumbrance on my people. They have to stint, by Jupiter! to keep me in clover. I ought to be earning money, not spending it."

She assented with decision. He continued, not so fluently:

"With all the good will in the world, I can't help father now. I made a mess of a small job the other day. If father died to-morrow, I should be hopelessly at sea on this big property. I should probably drop pots of money through sheer inexperience. You've listened to your father. You know what he thinks on these subjects. I want to ask you a straight question.

What is to become of the landed gentry of this country, if they go on educating their children to spend money instead of making it?"

Joyce took her time, picking her phrases carefully:

"The landed gentry will go, Lionel, unless necessity forces them to face things as they are, instead of as they were. Father makes hay of the assertion that big properties can't pay. They can pay, and pay well, if they are handled intelligently, scientifically. Mr. Moxon says just the same."

Lionel laughed a little nervously.

"Moxon said that, did he? Probably about this very property? Ah! I thought so. Please go on."

"What applies to our great manufacturing industries, so Mr. Moxon says, applies also to the land question. Manufacturers who refuse to scrap obsolete machinery are scrapped themselves. The inventive genius of this country is marvellous. What made the Germans rich?"

"I'm hanged if I know."

"Mr. Moxon told me. A process for reducing refractory iron ores which was invented by an Englishman. This estate has been worked upon the same conservative lines for generations. These lines are worked out."

Her voice died away. Lionel was tremendously impressed. What a clever little woman it was, to be sure! But a jealous pang pierced him. If he could talk, like Moxon——! And how closely she must have listened to the beggar

to repeat, as she did, his very words; for he guessed that they were not her words. And Moxon was coming back, confound him! He felt absurdly cheap and small, when he compared himself to Moxon. Unable to answer Moxon out of his own pitiful inexperience, he found himself repeating words often in the Squire's mouth.

"Of course, Joyce, this scrapping process is costly. Intensive culture, on any large scale, means a large output of capital. Reconstruction isn't quite as easy as Moxon thinks."

"You had better talk to Mr. Moxon about that."

"I will. Is—is he coming back soon?"

"I don't know."

As she answered him she blushed. Lionel drew false inferences from that blush. She continued hurriedly:

"Anyway, if something isn't done, and soon, by the country gentlemen, we shall live to see a few immense properties owned by plutocrats, and all the other estates split up into small holdings."

Lionel groaned.

"I can't think of that, Joyce. It tears me horribly. Does your father hope for that?"

"No. Father detests slackness and inefficiency, because he knows how terribly they affect others. Labourers, for instance, at the mercy of farmers and landlords, men who can't be sure of keeping the same roof over their heads. He may be biassed—I don't know—

because he does interest himself in the wrongs of the poor. Shocking cases come to his notice, grievances that cry to Heaven for redress. Not on this property, but even here so much more might be done."

Lionel made no attempt to contradict her. He had heard enough.

"We come to grips now, Joyce. What can I do? What ought I to do? We are very old friends, and, listening to you, I realise with mortification that you are far ahead of me because my blinds have been down, and yours up during these last four years. Give me your advice, you dear old thing."

He leaned towards her, and she saw that tears were in his eyes, that he was torn, as he said, by an emotion and sensibility for which she had not given him credit. Everything that was best and most womanly in her welled up in flood. At that moment she knew that she loved him because he had come to her in his hour of need. But her self-control was greater than his. She looked at him with undimmed eyes, although tears gushed into her heart. And the swift thought flashed through her brain that if this was a representative of country gentlemen they could ill be spared. Another thought as swiftly took its place. She had wondered more than once why such a woman as Lady Pomfret had devoted her life to such a man as the Squire. Not that she underestimated what was fine in him. But he seemed of coarser clay, too massive a personality, too autocratic, for a gentlewoman

of superlative quality. Now she knew instinctively. The Squire, as a young man, had been like Lionel—sincere, impulsive, full of vitality, and with that same appeal radiating from him, the appeal for guidance, the stronger, the more appealing, when the woman recognises her ability to supply what is lacking, a lack of which the man himself may be quite unconscious. Prosperity had changed Sir Geoffrey, not for the better. What effect would adversity have upon him and his son?

But he had asked for advice. What counsel could she give him?

She laid down her sewing, clasping her hands upon her lap.

"I am afraid," she said. "You put upon me a responsibility. Father says people ought to be careful of giving advice because so often it is taken."

"I shall at least try to follow your advice, Joyce."

"What is my advice?" she asked with almost passion. "What is it worth—nothing. I am only an echo. You asked me the other day if you ought to leave the army. I have lain awake trying to answer that question."

It was a dangerous admission, and he leapt eagerly upon it.

"Have you? Lain awake, eh?" His voice thrilled. "That was sweet of you."

Her tone became normal—practical. She held herself well in hand, smiling faintly.

"I repeat I am an echo. I remember what

others say, and what I have read. Work will save you and yours, Lionel, undivided energies concentrated upon problems which are far beyond me. There has been one steadfast worker upon the Pomfret property—Fishpingle."

"I know. He's amazing."

"Your father," she continued, treading delicately, "has kept the traditions of his order. He has not neglected county and parish duties. Father gives him unstinted credit for that. He has worked very faithfully for others, but——"

"But——"

"How can I criticise him to you? It seems such impertinence."

"Joyce, if you are a true friend, you will say everything that is in your heart."

"Everything? Hardly! I am skating over thin ice. Has your father's work for others really helped them? Has it not taken the form of charity? Doesn't it make his people more dependent upon him? Doesn't it lead to helplessness in the end?"

"Joyce, dear, I believe it does. What would you have him do?"

"Him? If I could speak impersonally! Your father is not likely to alter much, unless he went through some great character-changing experience. The labourers in Wiltshire will remain much as they are so long as the squires remain as they are. What is needed is a shining example. The greatest thing that could happen, and which may happen, would be the object-lesson of science triumphant over our thin soil. The

landowner who makes his land pay handsomely will do more for his people than all the District and Parish Councils put together."

Lionel said humbly :

"I suppose that is undiluted Moxon ?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. I like him, Joyce. He is a fine fellow. I—I hate to tell you, but I've been a snob about Moxon, and listening to you I wish, with all my heart, that I were Moxon."

"Do you ?" She hesitated. Then she said slowly, "I am glad that you are just—you."

"Bless you !" he exclaimed fervently.

But she declined to answer his definite question about giving up the army.

"You might be wanted there, Lionel. You are a keen soldier. If there should be war ?"

The talk drifted to India. Presently Lionel went back to the Hall.

He was a prey to conflicting emotions, chewing a bitter-sweet cud. Three conclusions were in his mind : Joyce's friendship for him had not diminished ; she had lain awake trying to solve his problems ; in her kind eyes he had read sympathy and affection. That was the pleasant first conclusion. The others, as convincing to him, were not so palatable. She had repeated Moxon's words. His *ipsissima verba.* Joyce was not a phrase-maker, although she talked well and to the point. Does any woman listen attentively to any man unless she is interested in him ? Obviously Lionel was too modest and

too dense (as the Parson had remarked) to consider the possibility of a girl listening, keenly alert, to talk that might profit another man. Lastly, when speaking of Moxon, she had blushed. She wanted him to come back, and he would come back, this clever, able fellow, to turn a doubtful "No" into a glad "Yes."

With an effort he left Joyce and Moxon standing together at the altar.

He harked back to his own affairs doggedly. What could he do? A talk with Fishpingle might help.

He found that encyclopædia of rural knowledge in his room, still busy with Pomfret accounts, spectacles on nose. Fishpingle greeted him joyously. The rain had stopped, and the river would be in fine order. Master Lionel, of course, wanted his rod, a split-cane affair built by a famous maker, which the old man guarded jealously. But Lionel sat down and refilled his pipe, which had gone out during his conversation with Joyce. Being a "thruster," like his father, he rode straight at the big fence—

"Ought I to chuck the service?"

Fishpingle looked astounded. Lionel, without pausing, set forth his difficulties. Unconsciously, he, too, quoted Moxon.

"Tell me, Fishpingle, do you think that science can triumph over our thin soil?"

"What a question, Master Lionel!"

"You jolly well answer it, if you can."

"This is a grazing county. Science is teaching us every day better methods of getting more

milk from our cows, and a finer quality of butter and cheese. Sheep and pigs pay well where there is no wastage of food."

"Is there much wastage on our farms?"

He shot his questions at Fishpingle with a slight air of defiance. Would this old chap take him seriously?

"There is too much wastage."

"How can it be checked?"

"The labourers are very careless. One can't watch them all the time. And they love the old slipshod ways. What are you getting at, Master Lionel?

He replied impatiently, with a toss of his head:

"You. I'm a fool, and luckily I know it. The Squire laughs at my idea of leaving the army. He likes to think that I'm treading in his steps. So I am. But where do they lead—backwards or forwards?"

Fishpingle polished the lenses of his spectacles. He couldn't quite see this young man who enfiladed him right and left with questions which had baffled the wisest in England for five and twenty years. This sprig from a fine tree was shooting too fast for him. He evaded a direct reply.

"Evidently, Master Lionel, you've made up your mind not to go backwards."

"I have. But standing still won't help much, and I don't know how to get 'forrard.'"

"One lives and learns. It's slow work. All over the country the land system, generally, is

the nation's weak spot. I believe in the land. I hate to see strong young men emigrating."

Lionel laughed, but not too mirthfully.

"How did you get the truth out of those Mucklows? I did my little bit with 'em. By George, it was little."

Fishpingle disclaimed any credit.

"I know 'em, Master Lionel. I knew that Ezekiel Mucklow has been walking out with Mr. Hamlin's parlourmaid for five years. They just stand it so long. Then they want cottages in a hurry. To deal with 'em you must know 'em—all the ins and outs of their queer minds. Half the young men from Ocknell Manor have gone. That estate is a disgrace. And many others. It'll be in the market soon. And the Ocknells have been there for five hundred years."

"But you believe in the land."

Fishpingle might have been repeating the Apostles' Creed, as he answered solemnly:

"'Tis the backbone of England, Master Lionel. I've always thought that. And it ought to supply the nation with all the food it needs, and more too. We've ceased to be an island. Everybody admits it. Yes, I believe in the land."

"Do you believe in the landowners?"

"In some of them."

He sighed; lines puckered his face. He held out his hands, palms upward, as if he were weighing landowners, and finding the weight short.

Lionel said reflectively:

"You've answered my question. I ought to leave the army and put myself under Mr. Moxon."

"Mr.—Moxon?"

"Didn't you know? He's an expert, grappling with this very problem. He gave the Squire some priceless tips, but will he take 'em?"

Fishpingle shook his head. Lionel assumed a more cheerful manner and deportment.

"This talk has cleared the air. I haven't wasted my time this morning. I shall tackle my father next."

"Not to-day, Master Lionel."

"Why not?" the young man asked impatiently. "Does he think I'm going to waste all my leave playing tennis and fishing?"

"Go slow!" counselled the sage. "You can't rush the Squire. Mr. Moxon, if he is an expert, would tell you to read up the subject, to —to see the thing as a whole, to find out what is ahead of you, Master Lionel."

Lionel's face darkened again. He said moodily:

"I'm such a mug that I don't even know the title of one book dealing with land in an up-to-date way."

"I could lend you some books and pamphlets."

"You?"

Fishpingle rose and went to his bureau. Out of a drawer he selected two books and half a dozen pamphlets.

"This bangs Banagher!" exclaimed Lionel, as he glanced at the titles. "Upon my soul, you're a wonder! But, you sly old fox, you don't keep these in the bookcase. And I promise you that I shan't leave 'em lying about in father's room."

"Thank you, Master Lionel. Some of the pamphlets are one-sided. You must salt 'em. But the stuff you want is there."

"Hot stuff, too!" He glanced at one of the pamphlets. "Sport isn't spared, I see." He read aloud a title—"'*The Tyranny of Sport.*' Is sport a tyranny?"

"Sometimes. You know more about it than the man who wrote that pamphlet. But he gives his views. Lots of people think as he does. When you've read all that, Master Lionel, it will be time enough to talk to Sir Geoffrey."

Lionel tucked the books under his arm and stuffed the thin pamphlets into his coat pocket.

"You're right, as usual, old chap." He held out his hand, with a delightful smile. "You know, I look upon you as a sort of second father. Many thanks."

Fishpingle listened to his firm step, as he strode down the stone-flagged passage, whistling "Garryowen." Then he crossed to the hearth, staring long and frowningly, not at the photographs of Squire and son, but at the gracious, tender face of Lady Pomfret.

CHAPTER IX

THE little lady, as the Squire affectionately termed her, arrived at Pomfret Court a few days later. She brought with her many wonderful frocks, a habit (if the breeches and apron of the modern Amazon may be so called), and the shoes fashioned by the "One and Only" in Paris. Thus armed, cap-à-pie, she sparkled into view. Urban she was, and urbane. Her delight in the quiet countryside had no taint of insincerity. She was tired of Mayfair and said so unaffectedly. And she met Lionel, for the first time, as he came across the lawn after a ride through the Forest. Instantly she decided that he surpassed expectation. His tall, slender figure lent itself admirably to riding kit; his cheeks were flushed by exercise; he looked, every inch of him, what he was—the son of an ancient house, and a gallant soldier. Nor was it possible to suspect from his manner any prejudice, instinctive or otherwise. Lady Margot was his guest. Indeed, the mere fact that he did feel a certain prejudice against "dashers" who had "affairs" made him the more courteous and pleasant outwardly.

At tea Lionel said little. He listened attentively to Lady Margot's London gossip, nicely

spiced to the Squire's taste. She chattered to Sir Geoffrey, but at his son. Lionel expected some "swanking" from a young lady whose portrait appeared constantly in the illustrated papers. But Lady Margot didn't "swank." Her methods of attracting attention were more subtle. She imposed herself as a personage indirectly. Lady Pomfret may have noticed this, because her methods were not dissimilar. Lionel admitted frankly to himself that the visitor had charm. The word "chic" had been used so often by reporters that Lionel tried to find a better label, and failed with "mondaine." He knew that she drove her own motor and could ride hard to hounds. Beaumanoir Chase, where she had been brought up, was in the Belvoir country. The Squire, you may be sure, wanted first-hand information about that stately pile. Lady Margot was outspoken about her kinsman, now in possession of her former home.

"Poor Beau ought to have married me. He wished it, and so did I, till I noticed that he was prematurely bald, a long three-storied head, full of Victorian furniture. He is very hard up, and several thousands ought to be spent upon the house alone. Unhappily, father and he hated each other."

From her soft voice and candid glances you might infer that here was the most guileless creature in the world. She continued gently, as she nibbled at a sandwich :

"It is heart-breaking to go there and see things falling to pieces."

"Horrible!" the Squire agreed.

"Your fences and gates are in apple-pie order." She smiled at the Squire, who beamed back at her.

"You notice these trifles, my dear?"

His tone was almost paternal.

"At once," she answered crisply. Then she turned to Lady Pomfret. That shrewd observer detected a subtle change in her manner, a caressing deference slightly feline.

"Don't you think, Lady Pomfret, that we are sharper than men in noticing significant trifles?"

"You are, I am sure."

"A lone orphan has to be. Perhaps you disregard things and focus your attention upon persons?"

"Yes; I think I do."

Lady Margot turned to Lionel, addressing him quite easily, as if she had known him for years.

"Have you a cigarette? My case is in the motor."

"If you like Turkish."

She lay back, puffing contentedly, surveying the Pomfrets through half-closed eyes. They were sitting under a big walnut tree, said to be a sanctuary from gnats and midges. The great lawn, bordered by beeches, stretched far away into the distance till it melted into the park. Beyond the undulating park and below it lay the Avon valley now embellished by a soft haze —the finest view in Wiltshire, according to the

Squire. Visitors praised this view. Lady Margot, guessing as much, said nothing. However, her attitude, her air of being contentedly at home, might be considered better than any compliment. She murmured lazily:

"How delicious it is here!"

She blew a tiny circle of smoke, and watched it melt away, smiling like a child. The Squire said heartily:

"We shall measure your approval by the length of your visit. A fortnight, at least."

Presently Fishpingle and Alfred approached to take away the tea. Lady Margot greeted the butler by name.

"How do you do, Mr. Fishpingle?"

"I am quite well, my lady, thank you."

She smiled pleasantly at Alfred, who knew his place and remained impassive. Her cleverness in speaking to an old retainer delighted Sir Geoffrey. He glanced at his son, as if saying, "She's the right sort, you see—a pleasant word for everybody."

As the men-servants moved away, she said to Lionel:

"Your butler is a dear."

"You remembered his name," chuckled the Squire. "That pleased him. I could hear the old boy purring."

"But who could forget his name? Where did he get it? Is it a local name?"

The Squire stiffened. Lady Margot perceived that she had been indiscreet. He answered formally:

"It is not a local name. How he came by it I can't tell you."

She wondered vaguely if her host could tell, but wouldn't. Swiftly she changed the conversation, with a glance at Lionel's trim gaiters and breeches.

"I have brought a habit."

"We can mount you," said Lionel. "If you were staying on till August, we could give you a day with our buckhounds."

"Oh, why, why didn't I come to you in August? I have never been out with buckhounds. Tell me all about it."

Lionel obeyed. The Squire slipped away, followed by Lady Pomfret. As soon as they were out of hearing, he whispered to his wife:

"A good start, my dear. And, mark me, she'll make the running."

"I think she will, Geoffrey."

"Just as clever as they make 'em, Mary. Was it mere luck her pickin' out a subject which the boy can talk really well about?"

"Oh, no."

"Do you think she likes him?"

"Ask me that the day after to-morrow."

Alone with Lionel, Lady Margot kept him talking, upon the sound principle that young men, as a rule, do not use speech to disguise thought and action. Also, she was interested in his theme. The chase, in its many phases, excited her. Half an hour passed swiftly. At the end of an hour she thought that she had

his measure. She summed him up, temporarily, as "the nicest boy I've ever met." Of her many instincts the maternal was probably the least developed, and yet, at this first meeting, she did feel motherly towards Lionel Pomfret. She owned as much to herself, and was much amused and indeed tickled by a new sensation. Lionel, she made sure, was plastic, clay to the hand of a potter. His modesty and sincerity made a deep impression upon a young lady who, for some years, had carefully picked her cavaliers from men who were neither modest nor quite sincere. More unerringly she judged him to be no fool. He exhibited alertness and vitality—an excellent combination. He might, under discreet guidance, go far—as far as the Upper Chamber, for example. To be the wife of a peer may be a paltry ambition, but it must be remembered that Lady Margot was the only child of a great county magnate. Much that pertains to such a position had passed to her kinsman. Secretly she resented this. Her solicitors told her that a barony in abeyance might be terminated in her favour. No steps had been taken in such a direction. She made up her mind to wait till she was married.

It is not so easy to describe Lionel's judgment of her. Humbled after his experience with Moxon, he was willing to admit that his prejudice against an unknown girl had been absurd. Tom Challoner was big enough and stupid enough to shoulder the blame of that. The little lady, whose notoriety frightened him,

was delightfully approachable. Already, he had slid into an easy intimacy. But did he like her? Would he get to like her? That question remained unanswered.

They were alone together for a few minutes before dinner. He had noted the perfection of her motoring kit; he was not quite prepared for the frock which she wore that first evening. When she sailed into the Long Saloon, he blinked. She came towards him laughing.

"Tell me! Am I too smart?"

Her quickness of wit disarmed him. She had seen him blink. And she knew that the frock was a thought too smart for a family party.

He lied like a gentleman:

"Too smart? Of course not."

She displayed it, making a pirouette. She might have been an ingénue gowned for her first ball, an artless nymph of seventeen. No nymph, however, of tender years could have thought out her next sentence—

"I wanted my frock to be worthy of this lovely room."

"By George! it is."

"Very many thanks. Is that a Reisener cabinet?"

"I don't know. It's French, I believe."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! And you don't know?"

Her sprightliness infected him.

"Perhaps, like my mother, I prefer persons to things."

"Thanks again. But, frankly, I'm amazed. This room is full of beautiful furniture—all of different periods, too. But that doesn't matter. Really good bits, if they have age to them, never bark at each other. Those pastels are adorable."

Lionel flushed a little.

"I know nothing of them, either."

She shrugged her shoulders. In her hand was a fan, for the night was hot. She tapped his arm with the fan, and then opened it deftly, glancing at him over the edge of it.

"But, positively, I must teach you. It will be great fun. We'll play 'swaps.' I could write an article on 'tufting' and 'slots' and 'laying on the pack.' But I don't know growing wheat from barley." (She did.) "I'll go to school with you, if you'll go to school with me?"

"Done," said Lionel. "My hand on it."

They were shaking hands, as Sir Geoffrey came in. Lady Pomfret followed with a murmured apology:

"My dear, forgive me! The Squire and I are seldom late for dinner."

The Squire added a few words.

"You see we don't treat you too ceremoniously."

Fishpingle's sonorous tones were heard.

"Dinner is served, Sir Geoffrey."

During dinner, and afterwards, Lady Margot made herself vastly agreeable to the three

Pomfrets. If effort underlay her sprightly civilities, it was not visible. Her enemies—and she had some—affirmed that her consistent good temper and wish to please were indications of selfishness. Any deviation from the broad and easy path which she trod so gaily meant personal discomfort. But if her tact in avoiding conversational brambles provoked gibes from cynics, her *joie de vivre* disarmed them. And coming, as she did, to Pomfret Court at a moment when Lionel was feeling exasperatingly hipped and bored with himself she served alike as tonic and narcotic. She lulled to sleep nervous introspections; she stimulated energies which found expression in sport and games. He had wanted some one to "play about with." Lady Margot presented herself.

He soon decided that she was not flirtatious, as that word is interpreted in India. Physically, she kept men at a respectful distance, disdaining furtive pressures of the hand, languishing glances—all the cheap wiles of the provincial beauty. Mentally, so to speak, she "nestled up." Lionel felt more and more at his ease with her. She laughed derisively when he touched hesitatingly upon his perplexities. Such worries, she assured him lightly, were the common heritage of eldest sons of magnates. She propounded her own easy philosophy, so practical in its way, so alluring. Position had its responsibilities. It existed, if you like, on sufferance. But authority—for which by birth and training she was a stickler—would be disastrously weakened and in

the end wrecked, if it indulged too freely in sentimental vagabondage. Their caste repudiated sentiment, scrapped it ruthlessly.

For the masses—"panem et Circenses."

She touched airily upon marriage, citing the "affair" with the present head of her family, setting forth her case and his with incisive finality.

"We realised that we couldn't pull together. I think it was a real grief to both of us. Physically, he repelled me; intellectually, I repelled him. A sad pity! Of course he will find somebody else, because Beaumanoir must be saved. Poor dear Beau knows that he is not attractive, and a title, nowadays, fetches much less in the open market."

Lionel felt sorry for poor Beau. He said slowly:

"You can pick and choose, if he can't."

She accepted the challenge, calmly and candidly.

"My choice is limited, I can assure you. When I came into my tiny kingdom I thought otherwise. And some odd spirit of contrariety to which all women fall victims whirled me into misadventures with the wrong men. Most young girls set an inordinate value on brains, especially their own, if they have any. I tried to establish a sort of 'salon' in Grosvenor Square. The cheek of it! I used to admire Madame Recamier. All that is *vieux jeu*. My brains are not of the most solid order, but, such as they are, they will constrain me to marry a man of my own

class. So you see I am fairly up against it."

But he didn't see.

"Up against what?" he asked.

She laughed joyously.

"Up against the stupidity of our class. I bar stupid gentlemen and clever bounders. Some of the cleverest bound like kangaroos. Now you see, Mr. Lionel Pomfret, that my choice is very much limited. Probably I shall die an old maid, and leave my money to found an Institution for brightening Aristocratic Wits."

They were riding together when this talk took place. They rode out each day, making for the moors of the New Forest, where a horseman can gallop for miles and not leave heather or grass. Upon this occasion they had strayed further afield than usual, and were likely to be late for luncheon. Lionel glanced at his watch, and said so, adding, "I can show you a short cut through the woods."

They turned their horses' heads homewards and passed through a Forest Enclosure, where Lionel pointed out some fallow-bucks. Crossing a "gutter," where the clayey soil was soft, he found deer-tracks, and taught her the difference between the slot of a buck and a doe. Information of any sort, she assimilated quickly and gratefully. But a little more time was wasted over this object lesson. Beyond the enclosure was some open ground and another enclosure. After that the forest was left behind, and the riders were on private property. A line of gates led

to the high-road to Nether-Applewhite. Unfortunately the last gate was padlocked. Lionel glanced at the fence, a stiff but not very formidable obstacle.

"Can my horse jump?" asked Lady Margot.

"I don't know," he replied, doubtfully.

"We'll soon find out."

Before he could stop her, she put her mare at the fence, and popped over. Lionel joined her, delighted with her pluck. Without a lead, in cold blood, on a strange mount, she had negotiated triumphantly a rather nasty place. When he complimented her, she said carelessly:

"I love excitements."

For the first time he beheld her as the "dasher."

A meeting between Joyce and the little lady duly took place. Joyce, of course, was at a slight disadvantage. In Lady Margot she beheld Lionel's probable wife. In Joyce Lady Margot beheld a pretty, intelligent girl, the parson's daughter, more or less cut to approved pattern. She was perfectly charming to Joyce, and came to the instant conclusion that she must be reckoned with seriously. Joyce's first talk alone with her confirmed this. Lady Margot said chaffingly:

"I hear you are the ministering angel, carrying soup and tea and sympathy to the villagers. Do tell me all about it. I have never been able to do that. At Beaumanoir, when I was seventeen, I made the effort. I remember

reading the Bible to an old woman. She went to sleep, poor old dear. I discovered later that she was very deaf. She listened to the Bible when she was awake in the hope of getting something more material."

Joyce laughed and nodded; she knew the type. But she said quietly:

"I don't carry soup and tea to them. Father is dead against that, except in emergency cases."

"Please tell me what you do."

"I have been through a simple course of village cookery. I try to teach the mothers how to make their own soup, a *pot-au-feu*, how to cook vegetables, and grow them. All the little dodges which save time and fuel and money. Very poor people are astoundingly extravagant and thriftless. It's uphill work. I move about as fast as the hour hand of a clock."

"What else?"

"Oh, other little dodges to secure ventilation and hygiene. Anything which makes them learn to help themselves, to rely upon themselves rather than upon charity. Father has worked steadily along those lines. We have started one or two tiny industries, basket-weaving, mat-making."

"You like all that?"

"I love it, when one gets a glimpse of—results."

"Will you take me round with you?"

"With pleasure."

That evening, Lady Margot wrote to a friend, describing Joyce:

"The parson's daughter here is a striking combination of the useful and ornamental, as clear as her skin. She has an abundance of brown wavy hair with golden threads in it, and eyes to match, features good enough—everything about her well-proportioned, including, so far as I can judge, the mind. She is healthy, but not aggressively bouncing. I am told that a Cambridge Don is much enamoured. Everybody likes her, and so do I, perhaps because she is my antithesis in every way. Happy blood ebbs and flows in her cheeks. I envied a brace of dimples. . . ."

The two girls met at tennis and golf. Apart from the discussion of games, Lionel was amused to notice that their visitor pursued Joyce with eagerness, "pumping" her dry about work in the parish, insatiable in her thirst for information. Joyce slaked this thirst, wondering what lay behind such questionings: merely curiosity, or a desire upon the part of a future châtelaine of Pomfret Court to acquaint herself with the internal condition of the small kingdom over which, some day, she might reign. Lady Pomfret, listening placidly, inclined to the latter hypothesis. Several days had passed, nearly a week, and she had duly informed her lord that Lady Margot did "like" Lionel. She was not of the generation that uses lightly the word "love." And she guessed that "liking" might be enough for their visitor, who openly disdained intense emotions. She dashed at experiences and from them when they threatened to disturb her peace

of mind. But she told Lady Pomfret, perhaps designedly, that she got on "swimmingly" with her son. And, apparently, Lionel got on swimmingly with her. The Squire, summing up the situation to his wife, said, with a jolly laugh: "No complaints, my dear Mary, no complaints."

He took for granted that she shared his complacency and prayed night and morning that his desires should be accomplished.

Let us admit candidly that Lionel was drifting down-stream. The current of circumstances swirled too strongly for him. He told himself, with futile reiteration, that he must "do his bit." And the easiest way to do that "bit" was to marry Margot, *if she would have him*, which he thought was most unlikely. He had been asked to call her Margot, and did so. But she remained singularly aloof from the point of view of a prospective lover. This aloofness might be reckoned her "Excalibur," a naked blade which she deliberately interposed between herself and her cavaliers. Even the clever bounders, with rare exceptions, had not bounded over that. Being human, Lionel felt piqued, recalling Tom Challoner's words. Was she really cold as Greenland's icy mountains? But —what a companion!

At the end of the first week, Lady Margot learnt through her maid that Mr. Moxon had been refused by Joyce Hamlin. She had heard much of Moxon from Lionel, rather too much, for she had no sympathy with his views, and dismissed them contemptuously as academic and

Utopian. Finally, she had silenced Lionel by saying:

"I dislike schoolmasters. I regard them as necessary evils, like inspectors of nuisances. They ought never to be seen in society. I always behold them cane in hand, hectoring and lecturing. Enough of your Professor Moxon."

Nevertheless, she knew that he was well-to-do and clever, clever enough to have turned Lionel, neck and crop, out of a snug groove, leaving him hung up to dry amongst windy theories and problems yet unsolved. She had no notion that Moxon's doctrines had been filtered through Joyce.

Why had Joyce refused Moxon?

She dashed at the only conclusion possible to an enlightened student of life.

Joyce was in love with Lionel.

Poor Joyce!

She surveyed her tranquilly with sincere pity. Why were girls such hopeless, helpless fools? According to Mrs. Poyser, God Almighty had made the women fools to match the men. Was Lionel a fool, too? Obviously, as yet he could not read Joyce, but such transparent documents might be read at any moment. What then? Love bred love. She reflected, quite dispassionately, that Joyce and Lionel were a pretty pair, romantically considered. Passion slumbered in each. A word, a glance, a touch, and it would burst into flame.

Her maid had left the room. Lady Margot was alone in the virginal, chintz-calendered

blue and white bower which had been assigned to her. She lay in bed, with an electric light above her. A book, not a novel, was beside her. Memoirs were her favourite reading, not faked memoirs written by ingenious compilers, but the genuine article.

She laid the book upon a table, turned out the electric light, and engaged in her particular form of prayer—rigorous self-examination and analysis.

If she wanted Lionel, she must act.

Did she want him?

He had most engaging qualities. His manner with his mother was illuminating; such a devoted son might be reckoned sure to make a loyal and attentive husband. He had a sweet, sunny temper. He was intelligent, enthusiastic, and pleasant to look at. Greatest of assets, he was an agreeable companion.

And she wished to marry. She regarded marriage as an adventure, a tremendous experience. No unmarried woman could boast that she had lived fully. Again and again, lying wide-awake in the darkness, she had visualised herself as the wife of a successful barrister, or painter, or novelist. Such men, she knew, made indifferent husbands if they were at the top of their several trees. Success imposed intolerable burdens. Goethe had been wise in marrying a simple hausfrau. And brilliant men were so subject to moods, such slaves to temperament. Life with Lionel would be a delightful pilgrimage through sunny places. . . .

She thrilled.

An enchanting languor crept upon her. Perhaps at that moment she was almost in love. Her busy little brain stopped working. She beheld herself, as in a dream, alone with her lover. His lips were on hers. His arms were about her. She yielded joyously to his embrace. As if in a trance, she murmured his name—Lionel. And she hardly recognised her own voice. She moved, and the spell was broken. But her heart throbbed; every pulse had quickened; her cheeks burned. . . .

Then her brain began to calm and control the senses. She felt half-ashamed, half-proud of her emotions. Often she had wondered if she were quite normal. Many women, and some men, had told her that she wasn't. Never in her twenty-five years of life had she been so physically thrilled and excited.

Yes—she wanted him.

It will be noted that different causes had brought about the same effect in two young women. Joyce realised her love for Lionel at the moment when she knew that he had need of her; Lady Margot was thrilled into what she believed to be love because she felt the need of him. Let psychologists determine whether or not this differentiates true love from its counterfeit presentment.

She awoke, next day, quite herself, and capable of smiling mockingly at the momentary triumph of body over mind. But her resolution to marry Lionel remained fixed—a positive

determination. Cool, matutinal reflection made her reconsider the over-night conviction that Joyce must necessarily be in love with Lionel merely because she had refused another man. The first thing to do was to put this conclusion to the test. Sooner or later an unsophisticated parson's daughter would "give herself away." To her credit, let it be recorded, she resisted the temptation to "pump" her maid. Gossip with servants was a violation of her code. And, invariably, it led to familiarity, which she abhorred. Moxon's love story was told to her incidentally and inadvertently. Happy Chance had given her a clue.

At breakfast Lady Pomfret became sensible of a subtle change in her guest. She sparkled as usual, but with a more vital scintillation. That might be the effect of country air upon a Mayfair maiden. Allowing for this, Lady Pomfret decided that Margot was "tuned up"—fully charged with electricity, ready to take the road to a definite destination. She proposed golf, a foursome—Sir Geoffrey, Lionel, Joyce and herself. With all her cleverness she was unable to speak Joyce's name without an inflection of pity. Lady Pomfret caught that inflection and drew certain inferences. She said tentatively:

"Yes, yes, dear Joyce has rather a dull time of it. Pray ask her, and bring her back to luncheon."

Sir Geoffrey seconded this. In his mind comparisons between Joyce and Margot (they

all called her Margot) were inevitable, and much in favour of the little lady. Let Lionel see them together, the oftener the better!

Accordingly, the four motored to Bramshaw, a New Forest course, fascinatingly pretty, set in the heart of the deep woods, where William of Orange planted the oaks which he designed in the fullness of time to become ships of the line. Sir Geoffrey being the best player, Lady Margot chose him as her partner. She wanted to watch Joyce with Lionel.

The course was in excellent condition, and the fairway not too hard after July rains. The Squire remarked upon this, because it meant August hunting. Indeed, the first meet of the buckhounds had been fixed, and Lady Margot, without much pressure, had consented to prolong her visit. To Sir Geoffrey's great satisfaction she cancelled a Scotch engagement, observing candidly:

"I should be bored to tears up there."

The Squire asked jovially: "Does that mean, Margot, that you are not too bored with us?"

"Bored?" she echoed. "Do I look bored? I'm perfectly happy. It is dear of you to keep me on."

Sir Geoffrey took the honour, and drove his ball well down the course. Lionel fluffed his shot. The Squire chuckled. At golf the mistakes of our nearest and dearest are not altogether displeasing to us.

"We shall down 'em," he predicted.

They did at first. Lionel happened to be

badly off his game. Joyce played well and steadily. The young man's mortification deepened as he hit ball after ball into the rough, which, of course, made Joyce's following stroke all the more difficult. A couple of balls were lost in the heather and whins. On each occasion Lady Margot left the Squire to help her opponents to find their ball. Lionel's ever-increasing depression amused and pleased her. She liked men to be "keen"—up to a point. That point must not be a "vanishing point." For instance, the keenness of clever novelists kept them locked up, inaccessible, invisible. She rallied Lionel gaily:

"What does it matter?"

He answered irritably:

"Nothing to you, Margot. But I'm wrecking Joyce's game, spoiling her morning, confound it!"

Joyce looked at him. Lady Margot's eyes twinkled. What she had confidently expected came to pass. The parson's daughter "gave herself away." Her fleeting glance at a worried and apologetic partner was unmistakable. It flashed its message upon the ambient air, and was gone! Her voice, however, remained under control.

"You are not wrecking my game, Lionel. I like difficult shots."

"Do you?" murmured Margot. "And perhaps you regard golf as a sort of epitome of life?"

Joyce flashed another glance at her.

"I suppose I do."

"If you found yourself 'bunkered,' you would not lose heart?"

At last Joyce had a glimpse of claws, but she answered quietly:

"I should take my niblick and try to get out."

Lionel's voice interrupted them.

"Here's the beastly ball, and quite unplayable."

"What will you do?" asked Margot of Joyce.

"Play it out."

Her caddy presented a niblick. Joyce concentrated her attention upon the ball, deeply imbedded in heather. The ball was *almost* unplayable. The Squire sauntered up, slightly impatient of the delay, thinking of his luncheon.

"Chuck this hole," he suggested. "We'll walk to the next tee."

"Shall we chuck the game?" said Lionel to his partner. "This is not my day out."

"We're four up and six to go," added the Squire.

"Chuck the game?" repeated Joyce. "Never!"

Lionel pulled himself together. All trace of irritation vanished. He laughed, squaring his shoulders, sticking out his chin.

"Joyce is a stayer and so am I. Father, I'll take four to one in half-crowns?"

"Done!" said the Squire.

"I'll give the same odds," remarked Margot.

"Right," replied Lionel. "Go it, Joyce! Smite and spare not! Get on to the fairway, if you can."

"Get on to the green," exclaimed the Squire, derisively.

Margot frowned. An absurd thought harassed her, clawing savagely at something she despised, a rigorously suppressed sense of the superstitious. Had a mocking speech been taken seriously? Was this game, so much in her favour already, to be regarded as an epitome of the greater game to be played to a finish between herself and Joyce? By something of a coincidence, the Squire, who shared her desires, was her partner——!

Joyce planted her feet firmly in the heather—and smote.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Lionel. "The luck has turned. This puts ginger into me."

Sir Geoffrey and Margot applauded generously. The ball pitched in the fairway, and lay, nicely teed up, upon a tuft of grass. Lionel took his brassey.

"That ball," he declared solemnly, "is going on to the green. I know it."

He made a beautiful shot.

"Dead, b' Jove!" growled the Squire.

"Not quite," said Joyce.

Lionel and his partner had played "two more." When they reached the thirteenth green, each side had played three strokes. Margot had to play her ball from the edge of the green. Joyce had a six foot putt. If Margot could lie

"dead," the hole would be halved. It was not very likely that Joyce would hole her putt over a roughish green. Margot took her time, playing with extraordinary care. Her ball trickled within a foot of the hole.

"Down ours," enjoined Lionel to his partner. "You'll do it, Joyce. It's a sitter."

Joyce played as carefully as Margot, scrutinising the lie of the ground. Lionel did the same, adding a last word:

"Bang for the back of the hole!"

"I think so," said Joyce.

She holed out with a smile.

"Three up and five to go," proclaimed the Squire.

"Want to double the bet?" asked Lionel.

"No, boy, no."

"I will, Lionel," said Margot.

"Right again. Your drive, Joyce."

The fourteenth at Bramshaw is a short hole, an easy mashie shot, if properly played. A topped shot rolls into thick whins. Joyce, still smiling, pitched her ball on the green and overran it. Margot got too much under her ball, which fell short of the green into the bunker guarding it.

"Two and four," said Lionel. "We're getting on, Joyce. I love playing with you."

The Squire stared at his ball, and then failed to get it out of the bunker. He picked it up, looking sadly at a deep cut in its surface.

"My drive," he said gloomily, fishing a new ball out of his pocket.

The fifteenth was halved. The Squire smiled again. Joyce had the honour. She drove steadily, keeping well to the left. Margot felt disagreeably nervous, as she addressed the ball. Going back too quickly, she stabbed down, topping it badly. The Squire whistled.

"We're in trouble, my dear."

They were. The luck had changed. Margot had to play two more after the Squire's shot. She achieved a fine stroke too late to save the hole. One up and two to play.

"Close finish," said Lionel cheerily.

The seventeenth hole is only easy for an accomplished golfer. If you take a driver for the tee shot you go too far; unless you are a fine "iron" player you fall lamentably short. Lionel took his cleek, and was short, but well in the fairway. The Squire selected that old and trusty servant—a spoon.

"This does the trick," he observed to his partner. "There you are, Margot—a possible two, my dear."

He chuckled complacently, taking Margot's arm. He believed the match was over. The ball he had just driven lay some three yards from the hole.

Lionel said to Joyce: "If you want to wipe your shoes on me, Joyce, I'll lie down and let you do it."

Joyce asked her caddie for a mashie.

The shot presented no great difficulties, except that it was necessary to lay the ball dead at a distance of forty yards. To Lionel's delight she

succeeded famously, leaving her partner a putt of three feet upon a level green.

At this crisis, Margot failed lamentably. She ought, of course, to have laid her ball within a foot of the hole. Joyce, with the same shot, bearing in mind the score, would have played for safety. Instead, Margot putted boldly for the hole and overran it six feet. The Squire made light of this misdemeanour, for it was quite obvious that the little lady had lost her temper.

"I shall down it," he assured her. But his ball lipped the hole and ran round it. Lionel holed out in three.

"All square," said the Squire. "Now, Margot, we'll give 'em a taste of our real quality."

She smiled faintly, irritated with herself, irritated with Lionel, who was much too cock-a-whoop. In silence she followed her partner to the eighteenth tee. Joyce drove off as steadily as ever, no pressing, a nice full swing. Margot followed with a fair shot, but many yards short of Joyce's ball. This left the Squire a very dangerous stroke. If he played for the "pin," he might land in a ditch. If he "skrimshanked" Margot would have to play a difficult approach on to the most tricky green on the course.

"What shall I do?" he asked.

"Go for it," replied Margot, curtly.

Sir Geoffrey took out his brassey, shaking his head, as he noted a "cuppy" lie. But he knew himself to be a good and steady player, and this was "a corking good match."

To his immense satisfaction he played the shot of the day, carrying the ditch and running on to the green. Lionel congratulated him heartily:

"You're a marvel, father. That shot has cost me seven and sixpence."

"Not yet," said Joyce. "Play well to the left."

Fired by his father's example, Lionel made an excellent shot. When they reached the green the Squire's ball lay below the hole. Lionel's was above. The odds, therefore, were at least two to one against Lionel and his partner. Joyce had to putt downhill upon a slippery surface.

Lionel wondered whether her nerve would fail her. A fairy's touch was needed. If the ball overran the hole it must trickle on down the slope. Joyce, however, did exactly the right thing at the right time.

"It's a halved match," said the Squire, "and one of the best I've ever played."

Margot had the easiest of approach putts, but her blunder at the seventeenth lay heavy on her mind. She was terrified of overrunning the mark. She putted feebly; the ball quivered upon the crest of the slope, and rolled back. When it stopped it was further from the hole than before.

"Um!" said the Squire. "An inch more and you'd have done it. Cheer up!"

She was biting her lip with vexation.

The Squire putted for the hole and missed it.

"I've this for the match," said Lionel.

The ball lay some twenty inches from the hole. Lionel popped it in, and turned to Joyce.

"I could hug you, Joyce," he said gaily.

Lady Margot shrugged her shoulders.

"I must give up golf," she said tartly. "It exasperates me."

The Squire laughed at her, as he handed his son half a sovereign.

"We can't always win, my dear."

CHAPTER X

MARGOT recovered her temper and spirits as the motor sped homewards. The benedictions of the countryside fell like dew upon her, the soft air, the fragrance of pines, the leafy glades where the deer wandered, the great open spaces of moorland. Swift motion exhilarated her. She had paid many fines for exceeding the speed limit. She decided that she could think better in the country, and her thoughts, like bees amongst lime blossom, buzzed busily. Joyce had asked to be dropped at the Vicarage. The Squire hospitably entreated her to lunch at the Hall; Lionel insisted upon it; but Joyce told them that her father was alone. That settled the matter. Margot feigned a civil disappointment. At heart she was glad. The morning, after all, had not been wasted. The information she sought was hers.

The Parson came out to meet his daughter, and stood talking to the Squire—a tall, grim, gaunt figure. The deep tones of his voice impressed Margot. As they glided on again, she said to the Squire:

"Mr. Hamlin is a remarkable personality."

"Man of too many angles," growled Sir Geoffrey. "I bark my shins against 'em."

Margot nodded, too discreet to press an interesting subject further. Lionel had hinted that relations were strained between two autocrats, each intent upon having his way in the same parish. She wondered if Joyce inherited her sire's personality. Men obtruded that priceless possession; wise women hid it. Joyce might be wiser than she seemed, more determined, more resourceful. If she, too, wanted Lionel, would she fight for him as steadily and strenuously as she had played golf that morning? Another question for Time to answer.

At luncheon, telling Lady Pomfret a vivacious story of the defeat at golf, she obliterated the memory of her loss of temper by owning up to it.

"I made an idiot of myself," she confessed. "I lost the match, and eight big half-crowns—and my temper. Sir Geoffrey was adorable. I saw that Lionel hated me, but not so furiously as I hated myself."

"I thought you took it jolly well," affirmed the young man.

"No complaints, my dear, no complaints. We'll take 'em on again any day." Thus the Squire.

Lionel beamed. She knew that he was thinking: "Margot is the right sort. She *was* tried rather high this morning." He said ingenuously:

"I lost *my* temper, mother. Joyce played like a book."

Margot added demurely:

"In very pretty binding."

If she expected a compliment from the young man, she was disappointed. He merely nodded, adding after a pause:

"You wouldn't believe it, but Joyce makes her own clothes."

Margot hadn't a doubt of that, but she expressed suitable surprise and commendation. Sir Geoffrey changed the conversation.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. After tea Lionel went down to the river to try for a fish, a fat trout that defied capture. Lady Pomfret and Margot sat under the trees and talked. Sir Geoffrey stumped off to the Home Farm with Fishpingle.

By this time Margot had established intimacy with her host's butler. She felt towards him as Lionel did to the fat trout. She wanted to land him, to weigh him, to hold him in her small hand. Mystery encompassed Fishpingle. She tried to read his history between the lines upon a discreet face. That was her method of learning French history from "*mémoires à servir.*" But Fishpingle eluded her. She could find him at any time in his room; he received her courteously; he talked delightfully about old plate, and birds, and Nether-Applewhite, but never, never of himself.

As the Squire and his faithful henchman walked off together, Margot said lightly:

"You have many precious possessions in your dear old house, but it seems to me that of all of them Fishpingle is the most priceless."

Lady Pomfret became alert. At moments, Margot's cleverness frightened her. Not her sprightliness in small talk. Lady Pomfret could discount that, and did. But the little lady exhibited, in flashes, powers of intuition and characterisation which were certainly remarkable.

"Tell me what you mean, my dear."

"I speak of him as a possession. In the last few years I have had three butlers, each of them highly recommended. I pay a little more than is usual to my upper servants, because I want to keep them. And I think I am consistently nice to them. That pays, doesn't it? And yet, to my intense annoyance, they leave me. They are not possessions, as they used to be. Fishpingle showed me that handsome inkstand. I was consumed with envy when I read the inscription—'Fifty years' service!'"

"He became page to Lady Alicia Pomfret when he was ten. His duties, I fancy, were not too onerous. She had him educated."

"Ah! But, obviously, he has gone on educating himself."

Another flash. Lady Pomfret assented. Margot continued—

"How do you do it? Your cook, Mrs. Mowland, is another possession, and your housekeeper, Mrs. Randall. It's wonderful."

"They are our own people, part of the soil, and we live in the country all the year round. London makes servants restless. Change excites them. We have been fortunate in these—

possessions. You are right, Margot, they are priceless."

"I see you can't whisper your secret to me."

"There is no secret."

Margot laughed, with a little gesture of resignation. Evidently, Lady Pomfret was not to be coaxed or flattered into talking about her amazing butler. Skilfully, she selected and cast another fly.

"Your stillroom maid, Prudence, Fishpingle's niece, is charming. I ventured to ask for the recipe of those melting griddle cakes we have at tea. She said that the recipe was yours."

"You are most welcome to it."

"Thank you so much. Prudence is the apple of Fishpingle's eye, but you have chief place in his heart."

Lady Pomfret "sat up," in every sense of that slangy phrase.

"Bless me! He told you that?"

"Not he. I guessed. You reign supreme."

Margot sighed. Not without reason had an inspired minor poet given her the nickname—La Reine Margot. She wished to reign, not merely over men, but with a wider dominion over all—something difficult of achievement in London. As the *châtelaine* of Beaumanoir Chase this dominating instinct might have been gratified. She could say bitter things about the Salique law. Lady Pomfret wondered why such a visitor, so "smart" (to use an odious word), had settled down contentedly at Pomfret Court, where the entertainment of a town guest must

be considered hum-drum. At this moment light came to her. She divined that Margot was studying intelligently conditions which made petty sovereignty possible. She remembered the "pumping" of Joyce, which amused her at the time. Purpose underlay the many questions. She remembered, also, that Margot missed no opportunity of ingratiating herself with Bonsor and others at the Home Farm. She supposed that this was Margot's "way" (which paid!), and part of a sincere desire to please the Squire. Lastly, regarding her own son with a fond mother's eye, she had been shrewd enough to realise that, matrimonially, he was no great "catch" for an heiress of quality. In her heart, whilst humouring her husband, she had confidently expected a "*débâcle.*" A dasher had dashed at a new experience. Very soon, such a personage would be bored and flit elsewhere, a case, in fine, of Marie Antoinette milking cows.

And now, swiftly, she was modifying these premature conclusions. To make assured her new foundations, she, too, cast a fly. As a fisherman, she was quite as adroit as Margot.

"I reign happily over a small establishment. My rule, such as it is, imposes penalties. In my place, Margot, you would be bored,"

Margot "rose" instantly. The fly stuck fast in her throat. And the moment had come, she decided, when sincerity would best serve her purpose. She replied eagerly—

"Dear Lady Pomfret, you are so clever, but indeed you are mistaken. Sir Geoffrey, oddly

enough, this very morning, seemed surprised when I told him that I was not bored. I ask you, as I asked him—do I look bored?"

Lady Pomfret laughed, partly because it was pleasant to reflect that her hand had not lost its cunning.

"I have read somewhere, my dear, that you are an accomplished amateur actress. We have never entertained a visitor so easily. Indeed, you have entertained—us! At least, we might have invited some of our neighbours to meet so agreeable a guest."

"I feared that. I dared to hint as much to the Squire."

"The wretch never told me."

"I wanted to rest, to gloat in this quiet paradise. To fortify myself."

"For what?"

The quiet question brought a faint flush to Margot's pale cheeks, but she replied vivaciously:

"Against my autumn visits, a dreary round, which no longer suffices me. The people I know are too aggressive, too neurotic, too jumpy. I have chosen my friends—if you can call them that—not very wisely. My own fault. This last season was trying. One must keep up with the procession, and it simply races along."

Lady Pomfret felt sorry for her, pity welled into her kind eyes and suffused her voice. Margot looked so small, so frail. Take from her the trappings of her position, and what was left? A motherless young woman, who, admittedly,

had chosen the wrong friends. She murmured softly—

"Poor little Margot! You make me sad. But I am glad that you think of this," her glance wandered round the peaceful garden, "as a sanctuary."

"I do. I do. Why didn't we meet before?"

During the two days that followed this confidential talk with her hostess, Margot spun webs in that dainty parlour, her heart, now swept and garnished for the reception of Lionel. She encouraged him to talk freely, ever watchful and ready to steer him out of the troubled waters of introspection and windy conjecture into the snug harbourage of a practical prosperity. Lionel had read the books and pamphlets lent by Fishpingle. And Fishpingle had warned him that they were one-sided, written by men who had suffered abuses, who card-indexed flagrant instances with something of the same gusto which animates collectors of pornographic engravings. It was quite easy for Margot to deal with such propaganda. More, her knowledge impressed him. She presented the other side with a suavity in pleasing contrast to the acerbity of the pamphleteers. If she stickled for Authority, as she did, she garbed it in motley. Very cleverly, she laid stress upon the necessity of loyalty to their own order.

"You can't destroy your own nest, Lionel. Make no mistake! These demagogues mean to wipe us out, if they can. If they do," she

shrugged her shoulders, "it will be largely due to our indolence and indifference. We may have to fight with their bludgeons. My father advocated a Union of Landed Gentry."

"Why not?" asked Lionel.

"Because, my child, Authority detests co-operation. You see that in politics. The heads of different departments won't pull together. People talk of a united Cabinet. A Cabinet is never united."

The surprise in his face amused her. What fun enlightening such an innocent! She went on, more suavely than ever:

"Before I put my hair up, in my father's lifetime, the Mandarins used to foregather at Beaumanoir. Our chef was a great artist."

"Chinamen?"

"England's statesmen. I beheld them with awe—the Olympians! The awe soon went after I got to know them. Their very ordinary talk shattered my illusions. Believe me, Lionel, they are well called representative men. They represent most faithfully the Man in the Street, whom they study to please and satisfy after—*bien entendu*—they have ground their own little axes. Heavens! how they disappointed me. No imagination! No enthusiasm! No real sympathy! Just commonplace party politicians with a gift of the gab and ears pricked to catch the Voice of the People."

"This is a staggerer for me, Margot."

She laughed at his sober face.

"Come to my house, and you shall meet

some of them. There are rare exceptions, of course. I speak generally. I want to warn you and prepare you. Heaven has sent me to your rescue. You were thinking of chucking the army, studying chemistry as applied to land, and turning yourself into your father's bailiff."

"Something of that sort."

"A fine programme, if it could be carried out. But, suppose it couldn't? You might fail. What a situation then! Will your father co-operate with you? Will he supply the sinews of war? Experimental chemistry is costly, as my father found out. Success might come after many failures. Would your father stand the strain of those failures?"

"No—he wouldn't. But I must do something. Better to try and fail than to sit still and trust to luck. You are not very encouraging. Give me a lead, if you can."

She answered seriously:

"I think I can. I like you, Lionel; I like your people; I love this dear old place. It is far nicer than Beaumanoir, and I loved that. Yes, I should be proud to help you, but the obvious way is so seldom obvious to the traveller himself. You have come back from India to face conditions which I have heard discussed ever since I was fifteen. And I have heard both sides. Personally, I have made my choice. I stick to my order, sink or swim."

"I feel like that, too."

"Well, I have warned you that you can't expect too much from Authority. If it comes

to a real fight, we shall stand together. Meanwhile, every man in your position should prepare for that fight."

"You talk well, Margot."

"I repeat what I have heard."

Joyce had said the same. He remembered that in the mythologies Echo is a nymph.

"How am I to prepare?"

"You ought to be in Parliament. *Punch* may well call it The House of Awfully Commons, but there is no other place for such as you."

He muttered gloomily—

"Sit up late, and do as I'm told."

She laughed.

"It's not quite as bad as that. In Parliament you would get the training you need. If I know you, you'd forge ahead. At any rate, you would be in the movement. And your chance would come."

Lionel answered her sharply, with incisive curtness.

"You have not painted a flattering portrait of politicians, yet you urge me to become one of them."

"I described them as I see them, because you are so preposterously modest. You look up to them. Many of them could look up to you. Place and power are easily within your grasp. Men with half your advantages have climbed high."

Her flattery tickled him, but he stuck doggedly to his point.

"Parliament would mean a bigger allowance. Father couldn't afford it."

Her tone became light again.

"As to that, you are like poor Beau. You must make the right sort of marriage. Unlike poor Beau, you are well able to do it."

He moved uneasily.

"Margot—have you talked this over with father?"

"On my honour—no. Why do you ask?"

"Your views are his views. He put it to me within a few hours of my return home. 'You must marry a nice little girl with a bit of money.'"

The adjective "little" may have caused her embarrassment. And his voice, as he spoke, was low and troubled. He seemed, too, to be deliberately looking away from her. She saved an awkward situation with a ripple of laughter.

"Why, of course," she went on, quite herself again. "I could find you half a dozen nice girls. Do you prefer them—little?"

He stammered out a reply:

"I—I d-don't know. You see I—I haven't quite got to father's point of view. I mean to say I never thought of marrying at all. It wasn't exactly beyond my horizon, but——!" He broke off, raising troubled eyes to her.

She handled him with extreme delicacy and patience.

"I understand perfectly. Young men of your type don't think of marriage till—till love imposes the thought of it on them. But is it

possible, Lionel, that you have never been in love?"

"Never—in the sense you mean."

"Really? What a sensation to come! But—how shall I put it?—wouldn't you like to be? Every girl worth her salt thinks of a possible husband—generally a quite impossible man. Have you never thought of a possible wife?"

"In the abstract—yes. Are you pulling my leg, Margot?"

"Heaven forbid! I am nearly, not quite, as solemn as you are."

But she laughed gaily, contradicting her own words. Her laughter was so infectious that Lionel laughed with her. The ice between them broke and drifted away. He chuckled, like his father.

"I say, you must think me a mug."

"I feel," she paused, meeting his glance roguishly, "I feel old enough to be your mother, and really I'm one year younger than you."

"One year and three months."

"You looked me up?"

"I did."

She inferred, possibly, more than was strictly warrantable. Suddenly the dressing gong boomed out. Margot got up. Lionel protested:

"You don't take half an hour to shove on a frock, do you?"

"Sometimes. I am wearing a new frock tonight. I hope you will like it."

"You must spend a lot on your clothes."

"I do. Why not? I have money to burn. *A tout à l'heure.*"

She waved her hand and departed.

Lionel sat on under the trees, gazing at the lengthening shadows as they stole across the velvety lawn, and letting his thoughts project themselves into the future. No man likes to think that he is being pursued by a woman, however charming she may be. But such a probability didn't occur to him. His father was wiser in such matters. Lionel accepted Margot's advice as impersonal. And she had not been "primed" by the squire. The pair, such a contrast to each other in most respects, happened to think alike, independently and sincerely, upon a subject which they had not discussed together.

What would it mean to him, if he captured Margot? For the first time he thought of her not as the wife chosen for him by a fond and ambitious sire, but as *the woman* chosen by himself out of all the world. Any man might be proud to possess a creature so distinguished, so sought after, so attractive physically and mentally. Other men would envy him. In the regiment his pals would congratulate him warmly on "landing" a big "fish." No young fellow is independent of public opinion, least of all an old Etonian, a subaltern in a crack corps. Men he knew had been caught by enterprising spinsters in India, swishing tempestous petticoats of the wrong cut. He remembered what

was said at mess concerning such matches. Fordingbridge had gone a "mucker." Young Ocknell, too, the silly ass, had married a second-rate actress. And Ocknell Manor was offered for sale in *Country Life!*

He heard the clock in the stable-yard strike a quarter to eight. The short cut to his room lay through the shrubberies, and a side door not far from the pantry. He happened to be wearing tennis shoes. As he approached the side door, he saw Prudence and Alfred. Their faces might have been three inches apart, not more. Prudence giggled and flitted indoors. Alfred stood his ground, grinning sheepishly.

"Very cosy out here," said Lionel.

Alfred assented, adding nervously—

"'Ee won't tell tales out o' school, Master Lionel, will 'ee? 'Tis as much as my place be worth, if Squire caught Prue an' me mumbudgettin', he be so tarr'ble set on eugannicks."

"Trust me," smiled Lionel. "The Squire will come round, Alfred. I said a word to him, as I promised, but I spoke too soon. Don't worry! By George, you *are* a lucky fellow. Prue is a little dear. And you both looked as happy as larks. I say, I shall be late for dinner."

He rushed into the house, followed more leisurely by Alfred, still grinning.

Hastily dressing, Lionel was sensible of an emotion which might or might not be the quickening of love. He found himself envying Alfred. It must be jolly to have a pretty girl look at a fellow as Prudence looked at her lover.

The world was going round and round for them. Had little Margot such a glance in her battery? Had she ever looked at a man like that?

Had Joyce?

When he appeared in the Long Saloon, the last of the party, Margot was wearing her new frock, fashioned out of chiffon of the particular emerald green she affected and so bespangled that it looked as if dusted with tiny diamonds. About her white neck shimmered her famous pearls. She wore no other jewellery. Lionel, as he approached her, shaded his eyes. The Squire chuckled.

"A bit of a dazzler, eh, boy?"

"Quite stunning," said Lionel.

Margot flashed a glance at him, which the Squire and Lady Pomfret, standing just behind her, couldn't see. Long afterwards Lionel described this glance as a "crumpler." The question, so doubtfully propounded whilst he was dressing, had been answered. Tom Challoner was a fool. Lady Margot Maltravers might be cold as Greenland's icy mountains to him—and serve him right! To a friend, at the psychological moment, her heart revealed itself enchantingly—warm as India's coral strand.

They went into dinner.

The talk settled upon a cricket-match to be played, next day, upon the Squire's ground—Nether-Applewhite *v.* Long-Baddeley, a neighbouring village. The Parson captained his XI. The Squire, in a long white kennel-overcoat, officiated as umpire. Margot wanted to

play games. Looking on bored her. But the Squire promised entertainment. Obviously, he had set his heart upon a victory. Lionel was quite as keen. To hear the two discussing the "form" of different village champions, one might suppose that an international match impended. Sir Geoffrey mentioned a bowler, Joel Tibber, who put the fear of the Lord into timid batsmen. Joel could pitch a ball with deadly accuracy at the batsman's head. Having established the right degree of "funk," he bowled with equal accuracy at the wicket. Joel belonged to Long-Baddeley, but his mother had been born in Nether-Applewhite. The Squire felt that he owned a half-interest in Joel. Margot hoped that Fishpingle would take the field, and Lionel told her that he kept wicket. She learnt later that the Parson batted with a thick broomstick, about the right handicap for a man who had made his "century" for the Gentlemen of England. The Squire said solemnly:

"If Lionel is in form we shall romp home."

"Do you feel in form?" asked Margot.

"Ra—*ther!* But if that beast Joel picks me off, as he did last time, I shall want 'first aid.' Can you give it?"

Lady Pomfret observed mildly, "I take a little arnica and lint on to the battlefield."

Margot said, as solemnly as Sir Geoffrey:

"This is a serious affair."

She was assured of it. Any jesting upon the national game would be unseemly. It might be permissible to laugh at the cricketers, not at

cricket. This from Lady Pomfret, with a sly twinkle in her eye. Twice she essayed to turn the ball of talk from the wickets. Twice the Squire returned that ball to his son—and the great game went on.

Was Margot bored?

No. Such talk in her own house amongst her own set might be deemed impossible. The first ball would have gone to the boundary and stayed there. But here, in this panelled dining-room, with the scent of new-mown hay stealing through the open windows, with the pitch itself to be seen from those windows, lying smooth as silver in the moonlight, what cleaner, better theme could be chosen? It smelt of the countryside. It presented humours delightfully Arcadian.

After dinner, Lionel proposed piquet. Given equal cards, Margot was incomparably the better player. Lady Pomfret, watching her, noticed that she played to the score, played, in short, to win. She noticed, too, that Lionel seemed to be studying his opponent rather than the game. He discarded carelessly; he forgot to score points. In her own mind, smiling to herself, the mother perpetrated a mild pun. "He looks at her hands instead of his own." Lionel, let us admit, was watching and waiting for another dynamic glance. He might have guessed that a second would not be forthcoming too soon. A second might have weakened the first. Nevertheless, what was carefully hidden from Lionel revealed itself unmistakably to Lady Pomfret.

She beheld Truth before the nymph left her well.

"Margot means to have him."

The Squire, dozing in his big armchair, sat bolt upright.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "It's past eleven. To bed with you, boy! And take a pinch of bi-carbonate of potash." He turned to his guest. "Nothing like it to clear the eye."

"Take two pinches, Lionel," counselled the little lady.

Lady Pomfret read her and smiled.

The Squire rang the bell, a signal that meant "Lights out!" With his hand on the old-fashioned bell-pull, he turned to his son.

"By the way, I heard a bit of news this afternoon. The Professor has turned up again."

"Moxon, father?"

"Yes, Moxon." He added for Margot's benefit, "Not a Moxon of Wooton, my dear, but a very presentable and knowledgable young man."

CHAPTER XI

CRICKET matches of the first magnitude are played of a Saturday in Nether-Applewhite. At ten punctually, an aged and yellow bus, drawn by two stout horses, rolled through the lodge gates of Pomfret Court and drew up at the marquee. A young, fresh-faced man, sitting by the driver, tootled a tandem horn. Fishpingle said to the Squire:

"His lordship is with them."

Long-Baddeley formed part of Lord Fordingbridge's property.

The Squire and Lionel advanced to greet their visitors. They shook hands with Fordingbridge, Joel Tibber, and those members of the XI whom they knew personally. Mild chaff was exchanged. The Squire inquired after the twins.

"Two big bouncing boys," proclaimed the father. "It would do your heart good to see them, Sir Geoffrey."

"The more the merrier. Never expected to see you."

"I'm not playing, but I had to come. Lionel looks as fit as a fiddle."

"Yes, yes; India's made a strong man of him."

Lionel bandied pleasantries with Mr. Tibber, the captain of Long-Baddeley—

"I've put on chain armour under my flannels, Joel."

"Ah-h-h! Pitch won't be so nice an' bumpy, seemin'ly, after them there rains."

He spoke with sincere regret. A hard, bumpy pitch meant many wickets for Mr. Tibber. He preferred village greens for his deadly work. The Parson, wearing his Cambridge "blue," joined the group. In the cricket field he looked ten years younger. Lionel couldn't see either Moxon or Joyce. But the onlookers had not yet arrived. Margot and Lady Pomfret were expected at noon.

Joel won the toss and elected to bat. Hamlin and his merry men took the field. Fordingbridge and the Squire served as umpires. The two elder Mucklows went on to bowl. George, the youngest of the brethren, approached his captain.

"I can bowl a wicked ball," he said. He pronounced "bowl" as if it rhymed with "jowl."

"No, you can't," replied the Parson, decisively.

"I thinks I can," urged George. "God A'mighty made us Mucklows bowlers, He did."

"You stand in the deep field, George. If you miss a catch, you can go to Canada and never return."

He patted him pleasantly on the shoulder. George retired, grumbling. One of the Long-Baddeley batsmen asked for a trial ball. After heated discussion this was conceded as a favour,

not a right. Fishpingle quoted the law, upholding the rigour of the game, like Mrs. Battle. Another discussion followed the first delivery, "no-balled" by his lordship. Fishpingle sustained the decision.

Lionel was fielding at square leg, and between the overs had opportunities of chatting with Fordingbridge, who, matrimonially, was deemed by the county to have gone a "mucker." Lionel, however, noticed that he seemed the better for it.

"You must come and see my missis, Lionel. She's a topper. We're farmers. Rise with the lark, my boy. I feel another man. It came to this—I had to take hold or let go. Now I save all the money which I used to spend away from home. And I'm on the spot to check wastage."

"The simple life, Johnnie, agrees with you."

"Lord love you, I was slidin' downhill when you went to India. Couldn't look an egg in the face at breakfast, and bored with everything and everybody."

The game went on with varying fortune. The star batsman ran himself out, and hotly disputed the Squire's decision, daring to affirm that his lordship would have rendered another verdict. The Squire treated such incidents humorously, as not the least amusing part of village cricket. Fordingbridge rebuked the misdemeanant, saying in a loud voice:

"Don't be a damned fool, Dave Misselbrook! I'm ashamed of you."

Dave retreated. The batsman at the other end observed apologetically:

"Dave ain't hisself. His young 'ooman give him the chuck las' week."

Fordingbridge took this bit of gossip seriously—

"Did she? I must have a talk with the baggage."

Lionel laughed, but he was much impressed. Fordingbridge, as he recalled him, a man who raced, and hunted from Melton, and kept late hours and loose company, had indeed changed. Curiosity consumed him to see the "topper," surely a worker of miracles. Then his thoughts wandered to Joyce. Was she sitting upon the Vicarage lawn with Moxon? Why had Moxon returned so quickly? Had she whistled? *Confound it!* Thinking of Joyce, an easy catch was missed. Loud cheers from Long-Baddeley. "You duffer!" growled the Squire. Fishpingle shook his head sorrowfully.

At midday the spectators began to arrive. Margot and Lady Pomfret wandered round the ground, talking to the village fathers and mothers, who sat placidly beneath the oaks and beeches. Lady Pomfret anticipated diversion where it was likely to be met.

"This," she murmured to Margot, "is a character." They were approaching an old woman, who had been wheeled on to the ground in a bath-chair. She sat erect, tremendously interested in a game she did not understand. A grandson was fielding hard by.

"How are you, Mrs. Parish? Isn't this a little venturesome?"

"I'm the same as usual, my lady. My pore heart goes on a-flutterin' like an old hen tryin' for to fly. Doctor says 'twill stop sudden-like any minute, night or day. I ain't afeard. Maybe 'tis presumption to say that. I'd like to go—quick, wi'out givin' too much trouble. What fair worrits me is the fear o' poppin' off in public. If I dropped dead, so to speak, in village street, 'twould scare the little 'uns."

"I see your grandson is playing."

"That he be, an' proud as King Garge on his throne. Scared too, the gert silly! I told 'un to carry a stiff tail, I did. It mads me, yas, it do, when I see boys an' girls meetin' trouble halfway. Nice, religious lad, too. This very marning he makes me promise to pray so be as he bain't bowled out fust ball."

"And did you?" asked Margot.

The old woman looked keenly at her. Village gossip had spread far and wide the Squire's plans.

"This is Lady Margot Maltravers, Mrs. Parish."

"Ah-h-h! I guessed that. Did I pray, my lady? Yas—I did."

"I am quite sure your prayer will be answered," said Margot.

"I bain't so sure," retorted the dame, sharply. "God A'mighty's ways be past findin' out. I mind me prayin' as never so for a second husband, bein' lucky with Job Parish, but that prayer went on t' muck-heap."

After a few more words, they passed on.

"A gallant old soul!" Margot observed.

Lady Pomfret nodded, saying reflectively—

"I think I must pray for young Charley Parish."

Margot considered this.

"If you do," she predicted, "he will carry out his bat."

By the time they had circled the field, Joyce and Moxon had arrived. The Professor was duly presented to her little ladyship, who engaged him forthwith in talk, strolling on with him, whilst Joyce sat by Lady Pomfret. Moxon's face and figure pleased Margot. He looked that happy combination, a man of thought and action. His grey eyes were clear as his complexion; the nose was delicately modelled; his chin indicated resolution. When he smiled, he showed white even teeth. Margot said easily—

"Lionel Pomfret has talked to me about you. He is rather absorbent. I managed to squeeze your ideas out of him. They interested me, although they conflict with my own."

Moxon showed some surprise.

"Ideas, Lady Margot? What do you conceive to be my ideas?"

"The regeneration of the land, the amelioration of rural conditions, a clean sweep of—us."

She laughed, exhibiting no trace of malice. Moxon perceived, none the less, that he was challenged. He answered her quietly—

"I never said that to Pomfret."

"You must be mistaken."

"I am positive."

"I have it. You talked to Miss Hamlin and her father."

"Oh yes."

"Miss Hamlin repeated what she heard to Mr. Pomfret. Perhaps she failed to report you quite accurately."

Moxon hastened to defend Joyce. Inaccuracy was not her weakness. His views were public property. He repudiated warmly any desire upon his part to sweep away anything of value. Margot was constrained to withdraw the last indictment.

"All the same, Mr. Moxon—ought I to call you 'Professor'?"

"Most certainly not."

"All the same," she continued, "that underlies your programme. I am well aware that we rule, to-day, on sufferance. As yet, the country people, particularly the people in such counties as this, are singularly free from disaffection. You and your friends are stirring them up."

"To help themselves," he interrupted; "to make them realise that they are practically parasites, living for you and on you."

"I dare say. These good fellows," she indicated the Nether-Applewhite XI, "don't look like parasites."

"This parish is exceptional. Even here—I hesitate to offend."

"Pray go on!"

"Even here the condition is that of stagnant dependence. The labourers are at the mercy of

farmer and landowner. Power is not abused on this estate, but it might be. At Ocknell Manor the conditions are atrocious. Everything is left to an ignorant agent, who skins 'em alive."

Margot shrugged her slender shoulders.

"I repeat, if you stir them up, if you transfer the power to them—we go. I leave it to you to say whether you are honestly convinced that the masses will succeed where the classes have failed."

By this time they had strolled back to the marquee, and joined the others. Margot had no wish to prolong a futile discussion. As Moxon had said, his views were public property. She had listened to them, at first hand, from the more radical statesman who preached them in and out of season. Her particular object had been accomplished. Moxon, as she had guessed, was a man of parts. No girl would dismiss such a lover lightly.

But he had come back.

The rival teams lunched very fraternally together, and much shandygaff was consumed. Just before luncheon, Long-Baddeley was dismissed with ninety-two runs to their credit. Nether-Applewhite had lost one wicket. After luncheon, Alfred Rockley covered himself with glory. Joel Tibber had no terrors for him. Prudence applauded his feats with hands and voice. When Lionel and he got "set," runs came swiftly—four after four. Spectators from Long-Baddeley enlivened the contest. Old

gaffers left the ale-house to prattle together about matches played two score years ago, but never forgotten. To many an innings kindly Time had added runs. Finally, Alfred was caught in the deep field, and, as so often happens when a partnership is dissolved, Lionel, playing forward at a short-pitched ball, was clean bowled. One hundred and fifty-seven for four wickets.

Lionel, flushed by exercise and triumph, joined Margot. He looked his best. To his amazement, she fussed over him. He was very hot; he must put on a coat. A southerly breeze blew fresh from the Solent. He mustn't sit down yet. Why not take a turn with her?

Lady Pomfret was much amused.

The pair wandered off, but Lionel insisted upon watching the game.

"You will see Hamlin bat with a stump—a real treat."

"Not after you."

"Good Lord! And you are training me to appreciate fine bits. He's a fine bit, and I'm a cheap reproduction."

Under her schooling, he was learning much about Pomfret furniture and pictures.

"As to that, Lionel, you hold yourself too cheap."

Hamlin and Fishpingle were now batting. The old Cambridge "blue" exhibited form in its highest manifestation. Upon a pitch, now none too good, he stopped or struck every ball with absolute accuracy, timing them perfectly. Fishpingle presented the village "stone-waller,"

intent only upon keeping up his wicket and letting the Parson score. Runs came slowly. Lionel told Margot that amateur bowlers lost their length against a stubborn defence. Then he said abruptly :

"But, of course, you are bored."

"No, very much the contrary. I have seen nothing like this for years. I like it—the enthusiasm is infectious. As for the villagers, I wouldn't change them for the world. That dear old woman, Mrs. Parish—! The row of granfers on the bench—! Two of the darlings are wearing smocks. Your professor would change all that; give him a free hand, and he would people the countryside with men and women cut to pattern, all aping their betters, and all discontented."

"Why do you call him my professor?"

"He nearly got you. I suppose he belongs to Miss Hamlin."

"Not yet, I fancy," Lionel replied stiffly.

"Ah, well, she will be foolish, if she lets him slip through her fingers. Mr. Moxon and I have agreed to disagree, but I like him. He will make his mark. What are they cheering for?"

"Fishpingle is out. Now we may have some fun. The village slogger takes his place."

The slogger rolled out of the marquee, disdaining pads or gloves. Nether-Applewhite cheered, anticipating much leather-hunting.

"You hit 'un, Joe!"—"Stretch their legs for 'un, lad!"—"Ah-h-h! Now for a bit o' sport."

Encouraged by these remarks, the object of them strode to his wicket and took block. Lionel explained what was needed :

"We haven't time to finish the match. Hamlin may declare our innings closed if we touch the double century. Then our great chance is to get 'em all out before time is called."

"Where do we stand now ?"

"We've made about a hundred and ninety."

The slogger brandished the willow. Joel hurtled forward. A deep groan came from the bench of granfers as a judicious "yorker" knocked two stumps out of the ground. The discomfited batsman glared at a mocking field.

"I warn't ready," he shouted. "You hear me ?"

"Tut, tut!" said the Squire. "They can hear you in Salisbury, my man. Better luck next time."

One of the Mucklow brethren took his place. Joel delivered a terrific ball, which seemed to whiz straight at the batsman's head. Mucklow bobbed ; the bails flew. Long-Baddeley howled with joy. Adam Mucklow scratched his head. He was assured by Point that it was still on his shoulders. Sadly, sighing deeply, he went his weary way. Lord Fordingbridge said jovially : "Joel, if you do the hat trick, order one of the best at my expense." George Mucklow advanced.

"Don't 'ee be afeared, Garge !"

"I ain't afeared," declared George, valiantly ; but he was. His knees were as wax.

"No flowers at his funeral," said the wit of Long-Baddeley.

"Keep your eye on the ball," counselled the Parson.

Joel delivered the third ball. The unhappy George shut both eyes and flinched A derisive roar went up, so did the bails. George gazed about him.

"You be out," said the wicket-keeper.

"So I be. 'Tis sartin I didn't know it. I can bowl a bit, but this ain't cricket, 'tis murder."

He vanished.

A few more runs were added to the score before the last wicket fell. Charles Parish achieved three singles and carried out his bat. The prayers of two righteous women had availed that much. Total score for Nether-Applewhite, two hundred and three. Long-Baddeley went in with one hundred and twelve runs to make in less than two hours. If they failed, and ten wickets fell, they would suffer ignominious defeat. Strategy demanded careful play. Fordingbridge congratulated the Squire upon his pitch, a batsman's wicket, which accounted for big scores rare in village cricket.

Margot went back to Lady Pomfret and tea. She sat next to Joyce and talked to her. Joyce seemed preoccupied—not herself. Her interest in the game struck Margot as feigned. Her face, too, was paler than usual, faint shadows encircled her eyes. Was she sorry that Moxon had come back? It appeared, however, that Moxon's visit

was incidental, almost accidental. He had to leave on the Monday.

"Have you a headache?" asked Margot.

"Yes."

Margot, under the same circumstances, would have said "No." She decided that Joyce's sincerity might be reckoned her *cheval de bataille.* She expressed sympathy, offering to send her maid to fetch some aspirin tabloids from the Hall. Joyce made light of a petty ailment. The sun was rather hot. Her headache would pass. As the two girls talked one of the village mothers passed by, dragging a toddler of her own. The child caught her foot in the ropes of the marquee, fell heavily, and began to howl. Joyce jumped up, snatched the child from the ground, crooned over it, hugged it, made it laugh, whilst the young mother stood sheepishly looking on.

"Leave her with me for a few minutes," said Joyce.

The mother moved on, the child cuddled up to Joyce, and then fell asleep. Margot said in a whisper:

"That was amazing. How do you do it?"

"I am fond of children."

"And this one is a special favourite?"

"No; I don't think I know this child. The mother is from Ocknell. She married a Nether-Applewhite man, but they have only come here lately."

"It's magic."

Presently the mother came back, but the

child left Joyce reluctantly. Margot thought that she had guessed the riddle.

"She must ill-treat the child."

Joyce smiled.

"Oh no. Village mothers rather spoil their children. Didn't you know that?"

Margot confessed that she didn't. Joyce continued:

"But, of course, there is the reaction, when they are tired and fussed. That mother was fussed. I saw it at once. To come here this afternoon means more work to-night."

"How is your headache?"

"Gone!"

"Really, you know, you're rather an amazing person. But you hide your light. I don't. Yours burns with a steadier beam."

"A farthing dip," said Joyce.

Stumps were to be drawn at seven promptly. As the minutes slipped by, Nether-Applewhite realised sorrowfully that Time had ranged himself with the enemy. Long ago, they had abandoned the hope of scoring runs. Each batsman was instructed to block the bowling, to hold the fort defensively. Five wickets had fallen for some sixty runs, and the best batsmen were out. Could the tail of the team wag on for twenty minutes? Hamlin put himself on to bowl lobs, twisting, curling, underhand balls. At Cambridge, long ago, the head of his College, the illustrious Master of Trinity, had made a jest upon Hamlin's bowling. Presenting a prize set

of books, he had remarked blandly, "Hamlin, you are the only undergraduate I know who has combined underhand practices with stainless integrity."

"Sneaks!" said Long-Baddeley.

Hamlin waved his field in nearer. Lionel, at square leg, drew so near the batsman that Margot trembled for his safety. And Hamlin, delivering his ball, followed it valiantly halfway up the pitch. Point stationed himself four yards from the crease. The mighty Tibber fell to these tactics. Point took the ball almost from the bottom of the bat, and said politely, "Thank you." Four wickets to fall and sixteen minutes to go!

The seventh wicket fell five minutes later to a ball that pitched three feet wide of the stumps on the off side and then nicked off the leg bail.

Three and eleven!

The granfers had shouted themselves thirsty and hoarse. One patriarch announced his intentions, "If so be as we win, I'll carry more good ale to-night than any man o' my years in Wiltsheer."

Excitement gripped Margot and Joyce. Every stroke was cheered and counter-cheered. Derisive comment winged its way to the pitch from every point of the compass, and from every mouth, male and female. Lady Pomfret discovered that she had split a new pair of gloves. Above the Squire's white coat glowed a face red as the harvest sun, now declining through a

haze. Fordingbridge exhorted his men to endure patiently to the end.

Three wickets to fall and seven minutes to go!

At this crisis Lionel distinguished himself and wiped out the grievous memory of a dropped catch in the first innings. A stalwart son of Long-Baddeley smote hard at a ball pitched too short, pulling it savagely to leg. Lionel held it convulsively.

"Good boy," said the Squire, wiping his forehead.

Even the ranks of Tuscany cheered.

Two and five!

Could it be done? Candour compels us to state that Fabian tactics might have succeeded, had not Fordingbridge been present. He, good sportsman, suffered no exasperating delays. Batsmen dared not tarry, drawing on their gloves.

One and three!

George Mucklow took heart of grace. Funk exuded from every pore of the tenth batsman's skin as he, like George, tremblingly asked the umpire for block.

"Block be damned!" shouted his lordship. "Hit the next ball to the boundary, and I'll give you a fiver."

This counsel of perfection undid the unhappy youth. Hamlin bowled straight and true for the middle stump. The youth smote and missed.

"Bif!" yelled Lionel.

All out and one minute to spare. As the

Nether-Applewhite team carried the Parson shoulder high to the marquee, the stable clock tolled solemnly the defeat of Long-Baddeley. Fishpingle and Alfred hurried to the house, but the Squire's voice roared after them—

"Ben!"

"Sir Geoffrey?"

"Champagne to-night."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey."

Margot inquired tenderly after Lionel's hands. He had anticipated "first aid"; it was his, even to the sacrifice of a tiny handkerchief. Lionel demanded nothing more romantic than a tankard of shandygaff. Margot fetched it, for the moment his obedient slave. Joyce ministered as faithfully to her father with ginger beer.

When the yellow 'bus was full, inside and out, the Squire made a short speech to which Fordingbridge responded. How pleasant it is to hear such simple rhetoric! How invidious the task of setting it down! The better team had won. A jolly day was over.

Three cheers for Sir Geoffrey Pomfret!

And three cheers for his "lardship"!

Lionel said to Margot—

"This is the sort of thing we dream of on the Plains. The whole scene rises out of the desert, like a mirage."

"I wonder if it is a mirage?"

"Eh?"

"*Tout passe.*" She sighed.

Lionel looked at her uneasily, wondering if

a vein of cynicism, seldom displayed, was merely superficial. At any rate Joyce and she had forced him to think, to analyse his thoughts, to draw inferences from them. He said slowly:

"I took it all for granted before I went to India. It never occurred to me then that I was fortunate in my home or in anything else. I remember 'grousing' if a cog in the machinery slipped. Machinery! That's the word. I reckoned this to be machinery. By George! I hadn't wit enough to reflect that machinery doesn't last for ever and ever."

She made no reply.

Her sprightly brain was busy, applying what he had said to herself. For her the past fortnight had been a fresh experience, and perfectly delightful. The peaceful atmosphere, the rest to her own over-stimulated nerves, her courteous hosts, her ever-increasing interest in the young man beside her, so different from the strivers and pushers of the metropolitan market-place—these had sufficed. Would they suffice if she held them in perpetuity?

Frankly, she didn't know; an odd misgiving assailed her. Was she a creature of change, incapable of finding happiness in stable conditions?

She heard Lionel's voice coming back to her, as if from a distance. He was talking of Fishpingle.

"The dear old boy kept wicket jolly well, and he looked so ripping in his flannels."

"Yes. The moment I saw him—I knew. The mystery was solved."

"What did you know?"

"He is a gentleman—all through. His story—the little I have heard of it—confirms that. Lady Alicia had a pretty maid, who went about with her. *Une petite faute.* We can guess the rest."

"You are very sharp, Margot. That is mother's opinion."

"Is it? Then the thing is settled. Your dear mother is sharper than I am."

Lionel was astounded.

"Mother—sharp?"

"As a Damascus blade, and as finely tempered. I must look up the directories. I never heard of a gentle family with the name—Fishpingle."

"Nor I."

"It sounds like the name of a place."

"So it does."

They joined the others on the lawn. Joyce, Moxon, the Parson, and Lady Pomfret were listening to the Squire as he dwelt at length upon the vicissitudes of the day. Alfred stood high in his favour. He gazed affectionately at the Parson. Lionel was welcomed with winged words; even so Nestor may have acclaimed Achilles.

"Is it a mirage?" thought Margot, as she went up to her pretty room.

CHAPTER XII

CHURCH parade at Pomfret Court was something of a function. The Squire assumed the silk hat and black coat of Mayfair, with shepherd's plaid continuations and spats. Lady Pomfret affected soft grey silk. Lionel could remember the day, shortly after he had joined his regiment, when, greatly daring, he had appeared before his sire in blue serge, topped by a billycock! The Squire stared at him, but said nothing. Had he despatched his son to his bedroom, with orders to appear in regulation kit, Lionel would have obeyed. Visitors, need it be said, were expected to answer the roll call. In winter and rainy weather the house-party assembled in the hall; in summer they foregathered on the lawn. At the right moment the Squire would glance at his massive watch. Then Lady Pomfret and he would walk majestically down the path which led to the church, at a pace sanctified by immemorial custom. The visitors followed, chastened, let us trust, by such an example.

It has been mentioned that the family pew was in the chancel, at the back of the choir. It held a curious collection of prayer-books with Pomfret names upon the fly-leaves, and as often

as not suitable inscriptions. Margot, discarding her own tiny manual, opened a much-battered specimen. In faded Italian handwriting were these lines—

"To my dear little son, from his loving mother, Selina Pomfret."

The date, upon the title-page, told Margot that this prayer-book had belonged to Sir Geoffrey. As a boy, he must have used it habitually, have taken it to school with him, and brought it back. Now the Squire used the great calf-bound manual, emblazoned with the Pomfret arms, and never touched save by the head of the family. Margot turned over well-thumbed pages. The Morning Service, the Catechism, the Litany, and the Communion testified to much use and abuse. Obviously, the Squire had learnt by heart the Collects. Amongst the Psalms she found a dried poppy-leaf, and elsewhere a rose-petal. Obviously, too, the owner of the book had memorised his tasks with difficulty, possibly with exasperation, for some of the pages were torn. At the back of the book, upon a blank page, were pencilled three entries in round hand—

Two ferrets.
Twelve nets.
Butter Scotch.

These, evidently, related to some rabbiting expedition, planned possibly during a dull sermon.

The little church was full of mural tablets and such memorials of the departed. In the windows were achievements. Here the Pomfrets

had worshipped for centuries; here they were laid to rest.

Would she lie down amongst them?

The choir-boys sang lustily the *Venite*. In the nave, occupying two front seats, stood the girls, under the charge of Joyce. They sang better than the boys.

She saw Moxon further down the nave, standing by himself, gravely impassive. Did he want to sweep away this? It was hardly possible that he could be a Churchman. Margot herself accepted the Church of England as an institution which lent power and prestige to her order. It served admirably the purposes to which, designedly, it had been warped. It sustained authority and discipline. It stimulated loyalty. It enjoined those of low degree to rest content in the station assigned to them by an All-Wise and Loving Providence. Strictly speaking, it had become political—Church and State, an ideal partnership. Just so a Grandee of Spain accepts and reveres his Holy Mother Church, which, admittedly, is better organised and equipped.

Hamlin put to flight these thoughts when he read the Second Lesson.

His personality gripped her attention. He positively forced her to listen. Presently he would preach. Would the presence of Moxon, himself an instructor, a Dominie, and a man of advanced views, influence the Parson in his selection of a theme?

At the end of the Lesson, during the singing

of the canticle, she noticed that the Squire was "ticking off" the congregation, making notes of absentees. Woe betide them if no reasonable excuse were proffered! He might well congratulate himself upon his people. The farmers and their families were conspicuous. Behind them sat the labourers, bovine, ruddy, with well-lined stomachs. The Pomfret servants filled two pews. Since the exposition of eugenics in Fishpingle's room, Alfred had deemed it discreet not to sing out of the same hymn-book with Prudence. He sat with the under-servants, but wisely apart from the stillroom maid.

Everybody looked smugly pious and respectable.

The sermon surpassed Margot's expectation. Hamlin spoke extempore, disdaining notes, talking to his flock simply, in words easily to be understood by a child. His thin capable hands rested upon an ancient cushion of red brocade. This cushion was all that was left of the three-decker pulpit removed when Hamlin first came to Nether-Applewhite. Long ago, in the Squire's boyhood, old Mr. Pomfret, in a moment of excitement, had pushed the cushion from him. It fell upon the sexton's head. The sexton replaced it, interrupting the flow of the Parson's discourse. Whereupon the Parson hurled the cushion into the aisle, saying loudly:

"Do you suppose, Abel Whitehorn, that I can't preach without a cushion?"

Margot recalled this story, one of the Squire's time-ripened anecdotes, as her eyes rested upon

the nervous hands upon the same cushion. Hamlin's hands betrayed his feelings.

His theme concerned itself with cleanliness. He took the text from Zechariah: "Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment."

Hamlin was at his best when he dealt with matters of common interest to his parishioners. At his worst, like most parsons, when he expounded dogma and doctrine. Margot perceived that the Squire was composing himself to enjoy the sermon. Cleanliness was next to godliness in his opinion.

Hamlin began with soap and water. Members of the congregation, too racy of the soil, stirred uneasily in their seats. Those who were fresh from the Saturday night tub smirked complacently. From bodies, the Parson moved easily to houses and thence to the soil, much to the interest and gratification of Bonsor and the Squire. Then he paused. When he spoke again, his tone had deepened. He leaned forward, sweeping the church with his keen glance.

"*Are your minds clean?*"

He went on temperately, delicately, but unmistakably. The children listened to every word.

"*The Divine Spirit cannot dwell in an unclean mind.*"

And then the last injunction.

"*The clean mind must be kept clean.*"

The congregation filed soberly out of church. Joyce marshalled the children. Moxon joined

her. The Squire and his party lingered near the yew tree mentioned in Doomsday Book, exchanging greetings with all and sundry. Margot said to Moxon:

"A fine sermon, Mr. Moxon."

He assented quietly.

"When I saw you in church, I wondered whether you belonged to us."

"I am a Presbyterian."

"Another Established Church. And yet, surely, you disapprove of establishments?"

He laughed.

"Of some. Powdered lacqueys arouse my worst feelings."

"Do they? Over-dressed maidservants have that effect on me. Shall we see you this afternoon?"

"I think not."

Lionel, with a Sunday luncheon slightly oppressing him, went for a long tramp by himself, seeking the high moorland, where he hoped that an ampler æther would clear his befogged wits. He was uncomfortably sensible of his limitations, as thinker and speaker, when he talked with Margot. She had characterised him as "absorbent." He "took in" her talk, but found it indigestible and clogging. Her experience, so variegated, produced a kaleidoscopic effect upon his mental vision, dazzling judgment. He was quick enough to grasp the elemental fact that she belonged to the "loaves and fishes" school. She had fighting instincts. She could

and would fight in defence of property, and all it included. And she would use, ruthlessly, her own weapons—the rapier of her wit, the heavy sceptre of sovereignty.

After luncheon, while he was smoking a cigar with his father, Sir Geoffrey had spoken a seasonable word.

"My boy," he said, "the little lady likes you. Now—go for her! Go for her!"

"You have had her in your eye all along, father?"

The Squire winked, laughing jovially.

"Spotted her at once. A dasher."

"I know. But why should she dash at me?"

"Tchah! If you come to that, why did your dear mother cotton to me? B' Jove! that bowled me over, I can tell you. She was a dasher, too. Sharp as a needle in those ancient days."

"Margot says she is just as sharp now."

"Rubbish! The most guileless woman I know. You ask a direct question—why does Margot take to you? I'll tell you. She knows a good thing when she sees it. I read her easily."

"I'm hanged if I do."

"She gave me a hint when we first met. She's dashed at the wrong sort, run riot a bit with a pack of half-bred hounds, clever riff-raff. Old Challoner told me that nice boys like his son were frightened of her. Being independent, she chose to trot out of her own class. Girls of her quality soon trot back. I caught the little witch at the right moment. It's time she settled down—and she knows it. She knew, also, what I

was up to when I asked her here. She came, she saw — and you've conquered. When she accepted our invitation to stay on, the matter was nearly clinched. Now—go for her!"

Lionel sat silent.

"Dammy, boy, have you nothing to say?"

"I like her most awfully, father. I've never been so pally with any girl, except Joyce."

"Why lug in Joyce?" growled the Squire. "She's canoodlin' with the Professor at this moment, I'll be bound."

Lionel experienced a pang. Jealousy ravaged him. The Squire went on less testily:

"No pressure! On you, I mean. These things must come about naturally. But—there it is."

"I'll think it over."

Every word of this confidential talk stuck aggressively into a not unretentive memory as Lionel breasted the hills above Nether-Applewhite. And he knew that his father was right. If he "went" for Margot, he might capture her. Very slowly that conviction came home to him. And she had said that she loved Nether-Applewhite. A carefully directed shaft which made a bull's eye.

When he reached the high ground, he sat down and filled his pipe. He began to think about Hamlin's sermon. Was his mind clean? Judged by ordinary standards—yes. But he was no Sir Galahad. Certain moral lapses engrossed his attention. Margot would laugh at them and him, but they obtruded themselves.

How was a mind kept clean ?

The Parson had dealt faithfully with this. But he was addressing an audience of farmers and villagers. Handling the same theme before a London congregation from a West End pulpit, Hamlin might have touched upon prosperity in its more tainting manifestations. The material side of life, its increasing luxury, its excitements, would have been presented inexorably. Lionel thought of Fordingbridge cleansed and rejuvenated by poverty and hard work. Fordingbridge must have been tempted to marry a nice little girl with a bit of money. Had he done so, what effect would it have had upon his mind ? Lionel returned to his own moral lapses. They had come about when he happened to be on leave, with "money to burn"—at a "loose end." What a descriptive expression! On duty with his regiment, working hard, temptation passed him by.

Not possessing a vivid imagination, he was unable to evoke a clear picture of a future passed with Margot. It lacked what photographers call "definition." Outlines were blurred. He had, however, an uneasy feeling that this little Queen would reign over him, and rule his life in lines parallel with hers. The *rôle* of Prince Consort was not too enviable. More, he had no love of London, no belief in himself as an M.P. Her assurance that he could hold his own with the mandarins failed to convince him.

By this time he was about as unhappy and perplexed as a healthy young man can be. His

desire to please and help his father, his acute sense of what Margot's fortune could accomplish, his growing affection for the little lady, his belief that his mother shared the Squire's wishes, stood out saliently against—what? A naked fact. He didn't love Margot. If she consented to marry him, the marriage would be one of convenience. It may be maintained by sentimentalists that recognition of such a fact by an honourable man is in itself a ban. Moxon, for example, would have deemed it so. But Moxon was not the son of an ancient house, nor part of a system. Moxon was capable of immense sacrifices. Like Palissy, he would have burned his bed to keep alight a furnace, if some vital discovery depended upon a few extra sticks of firewood. He would have perished at the stake rather than recant his convictions. And yet, with all his cleverness and sympathy, he couldn't understand the point of view of men like Sir Geoffrey. To marry to save an estate, he would have condemned as contemptible.

Lionel's thoughts travelled downhill to Joyce, to the Vicarage garden, where Moxon and she were sitting together. The certainty that on the morrow he would hear of their engagement piled the last straw upon his burden. And yet, with jealousy tearing at him, he failed to realise that love, not friendship, gave the green monster a strangle hold.

He returned to Nether-Applewhite. Passing the Vicarage, he saw Moxon walking up and down the lawn with the Parson. He hurried on,

now doubly assured that Joyce had "whistled." Moxon, no doubt, was receiving the paternal blessing. The green monster gripped her victim tighter. With a gasp, with a quickening of every pulse, Lionel beheld the truth shining blindingly upon him. He loved her; he had always loved her, since they were boy and girl together, and—wonder of wonders—Pelion upon Ossa—he had never known it till too late. Fool, idiot that he had been, in love and blinded by love, the plaything of the gods.

The animal instinct to hide turned his steps from the carriage drive, across the park, and into a small wood about two hundred yards from the Vicarage. He stumbled on, making for a summer-house, a tiny temple built by Lady Alicia Pomfret. It stood by the edge of a miniature lake, upon which water-lilies floated —gold and silver cups on round green plates. Lionel approached the temple from behind, silently, for his feet sank into softest moss. Suddenly he stood still, hearing a strangled sob, an attenuated wail of sorrow. Some woman in sore trouble was weeping. Irritated, yet loth to intrude, he swung on his heel. Who could it be? The villagers had free access to the park on Sunday. The Squire liked to see couples wandering, hand in hand, beneath his lordly trees. But this wood was taboo, because wild fowl haunted the pool. A servant-maid—little Prudence, perhaps—crying for her lover? No. The wood was out of bounds for her.

Could it be Joyce?

And, if it were, why was she weeping?

He must satisfy himself that it was not Joyce.

Cautiously he peered round the corner of the temple, glimpsing a pretty hat with no pretty head in it. He craned forward. Upon a stone seat, encircling a round table, sat Joyce. Her face was bowed upon her hands, which lay palm-downwards on the table. Her attitude—the relaxed body, the slender, rounded shoulders, the trembling fingers, were eloquent of overpowering distress. Lionel stood staring at her, petrified by pity and surprise. What had happened to make a dear creature, normally so calm, so serenely mistress of herself, this piteous spectacle?

He whispered her name.

She raised her head swiftly. Through a mist of tears she beheld the man she loved gazing eagerly at her with the shining eyes of a lover.

For a breathless eternity of seconds the spell remained unbroken. Then Lionel sprang at her —ardent, avid, aflame to hear from her lips the silent message of her melting glance. He held her in his arms; he pressed her yielding body to his; he kissed her hair, her brow, her cheeks. She remained passive, almost swooning under this revelation of his feelings and hers. Presently she heard his voice—broken, quavering, almost inarticulate:

"Joyce darling, I l-love you. I w-want you more than all the world. And—and you love

me, don't you? Say it—say it quickly, my own sweet Joyce."

Whirled away upon the rapid current of his emotion and her own, twin streams racing together, she whispered the words tremblingly.

He took her head between his hands, kissing away a tear, a dew-drop upon dark lashes.

"If you love me, Joyce, give me your lips. I want the very breath of your spirit. I didn't know it, dear, till to-day, but always, always my soul has been yours."

She hesitated. The colour stole back into her pale cheeks. She sought his eyes, delving deep into their honest, clear depths. He met the challenge of that searching glance, holding his head erect.

She smiled and kissed him.

Presently, holding her hand, he asked tenderly:

"Why were you crying? What has happened?"

She answered simply:

"Mr. Moxon asked me to marry him. I like him so much, Lionel. I felt so sorry for him. Then he went away. I knew that he would come back, because, being the man he is, so strong and clever, he couldn't believe what I said to him. It was my fault. My 'no' sounded, I dare say, weak and unconvincing. This afternoon he asked me again. I knew that father wanted it. I—I thought—I—I was so sure

that you were utterly beyond me, somebody else's——"

"Heavens! You accepted him!"

"Very nearly, not quite. If I had——! It was a dreadful ordeal for both of us. I told him that I didn't love him. He said he would make me. He pleaded desperately. At last I escaped. I ran here—here where we played as children, where we have talked together so often, where I read your letters. And then, I gave way. I cried—for you. And God had pity on me, and sent you."

Lionel said solemnly:

"May God deal with me, Joyce, as I deal with you."

Soon they wandered from the rosy present into a future dark with clouds. Lionel made sure that he could tackle the Parson. He spoke with entire frankness of his father.

"He will be disappointed, dearest; we must face that. He may withhold his consent, growl and bark, but he will come round."

"And Lady Margot? She wants you, Lionel. She couldn't hide that from me."

Lionel blushed.

"If she wants me, and I won't admit it either to myself or you, it is because she loves excitement and change. She may *think* she wants me. She ought to marry a swell—a personage. I shall tell her about you to-morrow. We are hunting together."

"When will you tell the Squire and Lady Pomfret?"

His face grew distressed.

"Joyce, darling, I hate to ask this of you. I—I hope I'm not a coward. But I must seize the right moment. I shall talk with dear old Fishpingle, who knows father better than he knows himself. And because it would be such folly not to use ordinary discretion will you, too, keep this wonderful news from your father till I have spoken to mine?"

She remained silent, troubled as he was, trembling a little. He continued urgently:

"For both our sakes, Joyce—please! Your father is a proud man, quick-tempered. He couldn't endure the thought of his daughter being unwelcome anywhere. I should feel as he does. And he would insist upon an immediate recognition of our engagement. There might be a scene, a rupture between Parson and Squire. Think of that!"

"I do—I do."

"I dare not speak to mother first, but something tells me she will help us. She loves you. But she would think it her duty to tell father. Indeed, he would never forgive her if she kept such a secret from him."

"Yes, yes, but, Lionel, I *must* tell father. I hate to refuse the first thing you have asked me, but father has been more than father to me. Ever since mother's death he has tried hard to take her place. Often I have laughed at him, when he came fussing to my room about my wearing warmer clothes and all that, but I loved him the more for his fidgeting. I must tell

him to-morrow morning, after Mr. Moxon has gone."

"He may forbid you to see me."

"You don't know him. He is proud, yes, but he will sacrifice his pride for me. If I ask him, he will help us. We may have to wait. Do you think I cannot wait for—you?"

They parted, and returned to each other. The man exacted pledges from the maid. She would remain true if the winds whistled and the tempest roared? She swore it, as she clung to him, hearing the raging blast already, shrinking from it, revealing herself adorably as weak only in this: the gnawing fear that her love might bring trouble and suffering to her lover. Gallantly, he reassured her. Let the storm, if it came, rage itself out! They would glide afterwards into a snugger harbourage. He turned to leave her, but looked back. Tears filled her eyes. He kissed them away.

"I found you crying. Let me leave you smiling. Your smiles, Joyce, are your dowry. I shall work to win those dear little smiles."

She told him that she was happy. Did he grudge her tears of joy?

"Smile, smile! Let me kiss your dimples. Where are they—those dimples?"

They revealed themselves and vanished. He tore himself away. Looking back again and again, he saw her erect and smiling bravely.

She smiled till he was out of sight.

Protest met him from three sets of lips, as

he came back to his family. Where had he been? Why had he skipped tea? The Squire said jovially:

"Very sound! Tea, after a Sunday luncheon, is an insult to one's dinner. The walk has done the boy good. Our air on the high ground is the best in England. Look at the rascal! His eyes are sparkling. But we missed you. Didn't we?"

He appealed to Margot. She assented, with less sprightliness than usual, trying to account for the light in the absentee's eyes. Lady Pomfret remained silent, lacking the Squire's faith in Nether-Applewhite air. She guessed that something had happened. What? Exercise might have quickened friendship for their visitor into love. Lionel radiated resolution. His laugh rang out crisply. He stood facing them, with his chin at a conqueror's angle. He wanted to tell the truth there and then. He told it in his own way.

"I have had a wonderful afternoon."

Margot said quickly, with a derisive inflection:

"There are moments when Lionel cannot bear the society of women."

Lionel retorted emphatically:

"A clean miss!"

"Who is she?" asked Margot. "Name—name?"

He met her instantly. Never had she seen him so alert, so joyous.

"Ah! Our Forest has its nymphs. They show themselves to the Faithful. They dance

with the pixies down our glades. Perhaps I met Euphrosyne."

The Squire was delighted. He made sure that a seasonable word had fallen upon fruitful soil. And any allusion to poets whom he had read—Milton was one amongst few—provoked capping. He chuckled:

"Euphrosyne, b' Jove! Heart-easing Mirth. I met the nymph," he glanced at Lady Pomfret, "in a London ball-room, and grabbed her."

"And tore her gown," added Lady Pomfret.

"She forgave me sweetly, tearing my heart in two."

Margot beckoned to Lionel, who sat down beside her. She said mockingly:

"If your Euphrosyne wore a gown, describe it to me. Obviously Sir Geoffrey has begun to make love to his own wife."

"I've never stopped, my dear."

Lionel knew that this was true. And the fact illumined his horizon. His father had married for love, and remained in love. Such a true lover would warm to all lovers. Just then he remembered Prudence and Alfred. Unconsciously he frowned.

"Why do you frown?" asked Margot.

The Squire was bantering his wife. Under cover of that jolly voice, Lionel said softly:

"I happened to think of two hapless lovers with a barbed wire fence between them and marriage."

"Really? Can't they cut it?"

"No—it must be cut for them."

CHAPTER XIII

LIONEL awoke gaily to the consciousness that he was in love, and beloved, and going hunting in Arcadia. What young man could expect more of the gods? True, Joyce remained at home. But absence, after the first intoxicating avowal, does indeed make the heart grow fonder. Nevertheless, he "funked" his confession to Margot. Had he been less ingenuous and modest that "funk" might have been greater. But he couldn't bring himself to believe that Margot really wanted him, as he, for example, wanted Joyce. And it must be self-evident by this time that such non-belief was justified. Men and women have so much energy. Some have more than others, but the underlying principle is constant. Energy can be conserved or dissipated. Margot squandered vital force upon many people and many things. Let the sages decide whether she had received value or not. Assuredly she had eaten many cakes.

Alfred assisted at the drawing on of boots, polished till they shone like glass.

Lionel said to him: "Prudence and you must mark time, Alfred."

"Ah-h-h! That be gospel truth. And 'tis

true, too, that stolen kisses be sweet, but I fair ache for more of 'em. Mr. Fishpingle do say: 'Enough, 'tis as good as a feast!' but I be hungry for the feast, Master Lionel."

"You leave it to me."

"But can you downscramble Squire, Master Lionel?"

"'Downscramble' is good. Keep a stiff upper lip. She's worth waiting for and fighting for."

"That she be, the dinky dear."

"I say, Alfred, scent ought to be good to-day."

That, also, was the Squire's opinion, expressed thrice at breakfast. Hounds met at twelve about six miles from Nether-Applewhite. The horses were to be sent on, a motor would convey Margot, Sir Geoffrey and Lionel to the meet. A second horse was generously provided for Margot in case the tufting were prolonged. The Squire said to her:

"I want you to see the real right thing from start to finish, a wild buck scientifically hunted and killed."

"I don't want it killed, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire was shocked. Such a remark from Moxon would have amused him. He thought this lady of quality knew better.

"Hounds must have blood, or they won't hunt. These deer wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the huntin'. They do a lot of mischief, the artful dodgers. And they lead a glorious life for many years, with a sporting finish. For myself, I ask nothing better."

"Have you been hunted?"

"Oh—ho! You ask my lady that? She ran me down in the open, broke me up, b' Jove!"

He made a hunting breakfast—fish, grilled kidneys, ham of his own curing—solemnly commended to visitors—and a top dressing of marmalade. "Tell me what a man eats for breakfast," he would say, "and I'll tell you what he is."

After breakfast, the Squire was busy with Bonsor in his own room. Lionel burned to tell his tale to Fishpingle, to read his face, to set about planning a sly campaign against the Squire. Joyce stood high in the old fellow's esteem. After a night's rest and half an hour's snug thinking in bed, Lionel came to the conclusion that his lady-love was irresistible. Fishpingle would share and fortify this opinion. Together they would leap to the assault. If a true lover does not entertain such high faith in the beloved, is he worth a pinch of salt? And when she is his, when that tender assurance has percolated to his marrow, with what enhanced value he regards the priceless possession. We have heard a collector "crab" a Kang He blue-and-white bottle as he bartered with a dealer, and, next day, rave about it when it stood in his cabinet. Lionel had never "crabbed" Joyce, but he had described her to friends as a "ripper," a "real good sort," and "bang out of the top drawer." Now, in a jiffy, she became Euphrosyne. He intended to ransack the poets for satisfying epithets. With any encouragement,

he might have essayed a—sonnet. The metrical difficulties would not have daunted him.

In this exalted mood, he sped, hot-foot, to Fishpingle's room. Finding him alone, he held out both hands:

"Congratulate me, you dear old chap, I've got her."

To his amazement Fishpingle remained lukewarm. He said almost awkwardly:

"I wish you and her ladyship all happiness, Master Lionel."

"Her ladyship!"

Lionel laughed as loudly and jovially as the Squire. Then he slapped Fishpingle hard on the shoulder.

"Her ladyship be—blowed for a shining bubble! I've hooked and landed Miss Joyce."

Fishpingle beamed speechless with emotion. It was a tremendous moment, a soul-satisfying pause as if the whole world stood still. Then he said fervently:

"God bless you both! I have prayed for this day. Here, in this very room, just before you came back, the Squire and I drank a toast: 'Master Lionel's future wife.'"

Lionel stared at him.

"What? Father was thinking of—her?"

"No," said Fishpinkle grimly; "but I was."

Lionel sat upon the edge of the Cromwellian table.

"Sit down, old chap. What d'ye think father will say to this?"

"Sir Geoffrey will say a great deal. I hardly dare think what he will say."

Lionel betrayed distress. Fishpingle's expression brought back the qualms which kindly sleep had banished.

"She's so sweet," he murmured.

Fishpingle nodded.

"She is, Master Lionel. You've chosen a wife, sweet as a field the Lord has blessed. She'll make your life and the lives of others as fragrant as her own."

"If you feel that, why can't father feel the same, after—after the first disappointment? Of course, you guessed his little plan. Everybody did. When I passed round the field with that little plan on Saturday, I heard snickers—and so did she."

"That clean bowled me, Master Lionel. I saw you together. It was too much for me. I missed an easy ball, because one eye was on you."

"How shall we break this to father?"

"We?"

"You old humbug. I measure your power with the Squire."

Fishpingle answered with dignity:

"I have never measured that power or abused it, such as it is. And I owe everything, everything, to your family."

"And what do we owe you?" Lionel spoke warmly. "You have devoted yourself to us."

"Most gladly."

"And my father doesn't quite see it. He takes what you have done for granted—as I did. It hurts me."

"Your father is dear to me as a brother, Master Lionel. I venture to hope that I am more than a faithful servant to him."

"Of course you are. Am I a coward because I ask your help?"

"I am the coward."

"You?"

Fishpingle spread out his hands. When he spoke his voice was low and troubled.

"I am quaking with fear."

He held out a trembling hand. Lionel seized it and pressed it. Then he went on, confidently:

"Joyce, the blessed honey-pot, has everything except money."

"Which is so badly needed here."

"I'm hanged if you're not depressing me."

Fishpingle made another gesture before he replied, selecting carefully each word:

"If you ask for my help, it's yours. But the Squire may resent interference on the part of his butler. It might lead to a breach, to—to my dismissal from his service. That possibility, Master Lionel, makes a coward of me. And if such a dreadful thing happened, it would make matters ten times as hard for you. You are dependent on him."

"Not absolutely. I could exchange into another regiment. I——" he broke off suddenly. "I won't admit that father's heart is flint. But,

rain or shine, my Joyce will stick to me, and I to her."

"Amen, to that."

"Now, what do you advise? When I was in debt, you said: 'Tackle him at once!' What do you say now?"

Fishpingle got up, and began to pace the floor, a trick of the Squire's when much perturbed. Lionel appraised that perturbation too lightly. He said gaily:

"You and I must downscramble Squire."

Fishpingle stood still.

"And her little ladyship?"

"I deal with her to-day, out hunting. We are good friends. So far as she is concerned my hands are clean. She has stayed on for this hunt. She leaves on Wednesday."

"We must wait till then, Master Lionel."

"Agreed! Between now and then we'll collogue."

A small field assembled at Bramshaw Telegraph, small but select, true lovers of the game, such as you meet on noble Exmoor. Hounds and hunt-servants were awaiting the Master. Presently he dashed up in a motor-car, one of the finest horsemen in the kingdom, a lover of hounds and beloved by them. As he walked towards the pack, the veterans, the fourth and fifth season hounds, rushed at him. He greeted them by name: "Ravager, old boy!—Down, Hemlock, down!—Sportsman, you sinner, you're rollin' in fat!" Then he approached a group of

men standing back from the hounds. They touched their hats. These, for the most part, were forest keepers acting as "harbourers." One, riding a pony—the head keeper of Ashley Walk—reported three stags lying near his house and getting fat on his turnips. In the New Forest a "stag" means a red deer, bigger, speedier, with more endurance than his fallow kinsmen. The Master, who hunted his own hounds, shook his head. Margot heard him say: "Ah, they must wait for a day or two, I've too many young 'uns out." Lionel told Margot that a red deer might make a fifteen mile point. The Master talked with the under-keepers. One, not a servant of the Crown, had seen very early in the morning a herd of four bucks in Pound Bottom, including a "great buck" (over seven years old).

"I allows he's that buck, zir, you had that tarr'ble run wi' las' year, when he fair diddled 'ee in Oakley."

The master laughed. "We'll diddle him to-day."

He returned to the pack, and instructed three men to couple-up and hold them, selecting three couple of "tufters," hounds that will hunt a herd of deer, throw their tongues, and if they get a buck warmed up "stick" to him. Tufters must draw well, and be fine tryers on a cold scent.

Whilst the hounds were being coupled-up the keeper walked on to where he had harboured the deer. The Master mounted his first horse,

a sage beast, handy in thick timber, a gentleman with manners and experience. Then he jogged on with the tufters. The pack bayed, loath to be left behind. The whips followed the tufters. Lionel impressed upon Margot the necessity of trotting about quietly, and not "riding in the Master's pocket." He must be left alone, so that he can hear as well as see. Those of the field who go tufting can best help by watching the rides to see if any deer slip across.

The Squire, on such occasions, generally joined the Master till they reached the cover. He knew every yard of the New Forest, having hunted in it since he was a boy of six. Before riding on, he said an emphatic word to Margot:

"This is not Leicestershire, my dear. You stick to Lionel. He'll pilot you. Go slow at doubtful places. You mustn't let that horse out in woodlands. If you try to take your own line, you'll be bogged to a certainty."

He touched his mare with the spur and joined the master.

"Sir Geoffrey looks his best outside a horse," said Margot, "and so do you."

"Do you like to see hounds work?" asked Lionel.

Margot preferred a "quick thing," a rousing gallop. Lionel hoped that this would be forthcoming. Meanwhile, he dwelt affectionately upon the superlative merits of certain tufters who knew their job. Really, to enjoy hunting in the Forest, it was necessary to watch individual hounds, whether good or bad. The

duffers of the pack running a fresh deer told the tale of a false scent as unerringly as the body of the pack lagging behind, with heads up, mutely protesting. His enthusiasm infected Margot as he talked on about the arts and crafts of deer. She didn't know that buckhounds were big foxhounds, with inherited instincts to hunt foxes instead of deer, instincts which had to be whipped and rated out of them.

Some of the field remained with the pack. Lionel explained this. A "tuft" might be better fun than the hunt afterwards, and *vice versâ*. With one horse out, unless he happened to be a clinker, it was sound policy to keep him fresh for the hunt proper.

Meanwhile, they had reached the spot where the herd of bucks had been harboured that morning—the "great" buck, a smaller five-year-old, and two prickets. Lionel pointed out their slots to Margot. The Master, leaving the green ride, waved his tufters into the woodland. Lionel trotted on to a corner which commanded two rides.

"We may see the deer cross," he said. "There is no prettier sight, except when we rouse them in the open."

A hound spoke in cover.

"That's old Sportsman," said the Squire, who had joined them. "I'll nip on to the next ride."

The rest of the field hung about with Lionel. The horses, very fresh, and full of corn, fidgeted and pulled at their bits.

"There they go."

The herd crossed the ride some fifty yards away. Music arose behind them.

"Now comes the real job," said Lionel to Margot. "That big buck must be separated from the herd, and driven, if possible, into the open. Then he will gallop away fast and far, making his point. Meanwhile, he'll try every dodge known to his tribe."

An excellent and typical tuft followed. The "great" buck, an old deer with finely palmated horns, left the others, but refused to break cover. He prodded up an outlying deer and lay down in its couch, he took to a "gutter" and travelled down it, he found some does and ran with them for a few minutes. Margot saw "the real right thing" and was properly impressed.

A whistle came from the whip on ahead.

"He's away," said Lionel, galloping on.

They reached the edge of the cover just in time to see the buck trotting over the Salisbury Road, heading for the finest galloping ground in the Forest. The tufters followed.

"Hold hard, old boys!" roared the whip.

The Master, very hot and red in the face, emerged from the woodlands. He collected his tufters and jogged back with them to the pack, about half a mile distant. The Squire joined Lionel.

"We lay the pack on here," he said to Margot. "We shall have a gallop, and I shan't see the end of it, unless I nick in somewhere. You stick to Lionel like wax. If he doesn't

ride at the top of the hunt, I'll disown him."

Lionel dismounted and loosened his horse's girths. Margot nibbled at a sandwich, as she waited for her second horse and the pack. Soon the Master appeared with hounds trotting at his heels. The buck had a start of about fifteen minutes.

"He'll need it," predicted Lionel, as he tossed the little lady on to her fresh mount. "The going is good at first, but if we get to Hasleys' look out for ruts. Sit well back and go at 'em slow and at right angles. If your gee pecks he may save himself."

"Sounds thrilling!"

"A gallop over heather is thrilling. And you'll be with hounds as long as we're in the open. I've seen thrusters from your country go very pawky over our moors. But your horse can be trusted."

"I trust him and you."

Instantly his thoughts flew to Joyce, who was not a horsewoman. She could not share this tremendous pleasure with him. Nevertheless, his soul sang within him, as he vowed not to be too selfish about sport. Riding home, after this jolly day, he would square things with Margot.

The Master waved his hand. Hounds swung upon the line of the deer.

"Give 'em time, gentlemen!"

With a crash of music they were racing away. A good holding scent in purple heather! The

big dog-hounds settled down to their work in rare style.

Lionel thrust his feet home into the stirrups, with a last injunction to Margot:

"Keep a fair twenty-five yards behind me. We're in for a fast thing."

Men threw away their cigars; women tossed their sandwiches into the heather. The Master tooted his horn.

"Forrard! Forrard!"

The Squire, and others of the heavy brigade, fetched a compass, hoping to save distance and horses. Lionel rode a little to the left of hounds.

Leaving Island Thorns on his left and Pitt's wood on his right, the buck headed straight for Letchmore Stream. Here hounds threw up. The Master cast them a quarter of a mile down water, hitting the line again at the spot where the buck took to dry land.

"Look how the leading hounds drive," said Lionel to Margot. "He's not far ahead. He tarried as long as possible."

The pace was now terrific. An August sun blazed down. The pace was hotter than the sun.

"If this lasts," thought Lionel, "he'll beat us."

They sped past Hasleys' over holes and ruts. To the right of Margot one young fellow took an appalling toss, hurled from the saddle like a stone from a catapult, as his horse rolled end over end. He jumped up, shouting cheerily: "I'm all right. Go on!" Another thruster, a stranger, was bogged near Broomy Water.

Lionel steered a little to the left, which brought him to the ford. Here the Master had expected the buck to soil. But the leading hounds flung themselves across the stream, picked up the line without a check, and raced into Broomy.

"Ware rabbit-holes!" yelled Lionel, looking over his shoulder.

Margot's horse jumped half a dozen cleverly.

"Forrard! Forrard!"

Out of Broomy on to the heather again, through Milkham, where the buck had passed a half-dried-up stream, and into Roe. Here the quarry soiled. On and on to Buckherd Bottom. Coming through this, Lionel caught a glimpse of ten bucks cantering away across the open, but too far off to determine whether the hunted deer was amongst them or not. The Master divined, happily, that he wasn't. He picked up his hounds, jogged on steadily, hounds casting themselves well in front of him, and before he had gone three hundred yards, four or five couple began throwing their tongues.

"They've hit the line again," said Margot.

"Have they?" wondered Lionel, watching the Master. "Some of the old 'uns don't think so."

Margot heard the Master talking confidentially to Ravager:

"That won't do, old boy, will it?" He roared out to his whip: "Stop 'em!" So well-broken were the hounds that as soon as the Whip called "Hold hard!" they streamed back to the Master, looking rather ashamed of themselves.

He rated them kindly: "Silly beggars! Think you can catch a fresh deer, do you? Let's see what you can do with a half-cooked 'un."

"Have we lost him?" Margot asked Lionel.

"We shall hit him off all right."

The Master held hounds on till they spoke to the true line a hundred yards beyond the false.

"They're away," said Lionel. "Look at the three- and four-season hounds racing to the front. Oh, you beauties!"

The Master touched his horn—one melodious note.

"Forrard!"

But the buck was too spent to go very far. He soiled again in Handy Cross Pond. Just beyond the Ringwood Road a forest-keeper was seen carrying his gun.

"Don't shoot the deer!"

"Ah-h-h! I seed 'un—a gert buck with his jaw out, an' not gone six minutes, seemin'ly. Turnin', left-handed, zur, to Ridley. There s a herd o' bucks afore 'un, too."

"Forrard on!"

Ravager and Whistler, who had been leading, now gave pride of place to Welladay and Armlet. Old hounds know full well when their quarry is sinking. The gallant buck turned again, right-handed, and swung between Picket Post and Burley upon an open plain where hounds got a view of him. They coursed him, running mute, for nearly a mile, and at last rolled him over in the open. A ten-mile point

from where the pack was laid on and eleven from the couch where he was roused. Time—one hour and forty minutes!

"A clinker," said Lionel to Margot.

After the last rites had been swiftly performed, the Master took Lionel aside.

"Who is the little lady? She went like a bird."

When he heard her name he laughed and winked knowingly. Evidently the Squire had been talking indiscreetly. The Master chuckled and winked again as he said:

"This deer's head, set up by Rowland Ward, would make a corkin' weddin' present—what?"

Hounds went back to kennels.

The Squire had jogged home by himself. His horse was out of condition, and, probably, he wished to give Lionel a chance. Marriages may or may not be made in heaven, but many are comfortably arranged in the hunting-field, and most of these, we fancy, bud and blossom when a man and a maid ride home together after a good run.

Long before Lionel began his tale, Margot's intuition warned her that the expected would not come to pass. His too cheery manner, revealing rather than concealing nervousness, betrayed him. She remembered the round of golf, and her premonition that Joyce would win the greater game.

Joyce was Euphrosyne.

It is difficult to analyse her feelings at this

moment, because she failed to analyse them herself. Nor was this a first experience. She had seen men she liked, men whom she had deliberately considered as possible Prince Consorts, men who had pursued her, grow cold in the chase and drop out. And always she had accepted this philosophically, with a disdainful shrug of the shoulders. Unlike most women, she could shift her point of view with disconcerting swiftness and adroitness. Disconcerting to herself and to others! Boredom inevitably followed fresh excitements. Lionel's word "mirage" had kept her awake on the night after the cricket match. Was life, for her, a succession of mirages? Would the charm of Pomfret Court fade and vanish if she married Lionel?

She had not answered such questions. Perhaps the kindly sprites whom old-fashioned folk still speak of as "guardian angels" were soaping the ways by which Lionel's tale might slide into her mind. Nevertheless it would be fatuous to deny that her pride escaped humiliation, although pride saved an unhappy situation for Lionel.

He began hesitatingly:

"You and I are good pals, Margot."

At this opening doubt vanished. Instantly, with a ripple of laughter, she said quickly:

"You have something to tell me."

"Yes."

"A secret to share with a pal."

"How amazingly quick you are!"

"I can guess your secret, my dear young friend."

He flushed at a faintly derisive inflection. She continued in the same tone:

"The nice little girls whom I had picked out for your inspection and selection may be left in peace, so far as you are concerned."

"How did you guess?"

"You have a delightfully ingenuous face, Lionel. It is at once an asset and a liability. Let me do some more guessing. Put me right if I am wrong. Poor Mr. Moxon might be a happy man to-day if you had stayed in India. Well, my dear," her tone became maternal, "you have chosen a pretty, good, amiable girl, but can I—can I congratulate you with all my heart?"

The adjectives rankled, but he remained silent. Margot was reflecting that revenge, so dear to slighted women, was a weapon that would be wielded quite adequately by Sir Geoffrey Pomfret. She continued sweetly:

"I want to congratulate you, but I see so plainly all the obstacles. You rode straight to-day. I am wondering how you will negotiate the fences between your father and his parson's daughter."

"They look big enough to me, I can assure you."

The paramount desire to please herself by pleasing others rose strong within her. Why be "cattish" with a jolly boy? Let him think of her for ever and ever as a pal. All trace of claws vanished as she said softly:

"If I can help you I will."

He responded affectionately:

"You are a good sort. Help me? Of course you can. I—I think mother will side with me."

Almost she betrayed herself. The words flew to her lips, "Lady Pomfret didn't side with me." Fortunately they remained unspoken. She said instead:

"Probably. Joyce Hamlin is dear to her. Frankly, I feel most sorry for your mother. What a poignant position! If she sides with you she declares war against her husband, who boasts that he is still her lover."

Lionel grew more and more depressed. His next remark had humour in it, not intended by him.

"You aren't helping me much, Margot."

She saw the humour and laughed.

"Cheer up! You are an only child. Your father loves you. In the end he will climb down, but the fences are there, and you are still on the wrong side of them."

"I dare say you would dash at 'em."

"I am I. I've ridden for a fall before now, and had it. You are you. A fall over these particular fences might be disastrous. Go canny! Creep! Crane! That is my advice."

"I feel that way myself, although I hate creeping and craning. Did father say anything to you about Johnnie Fordingbridge?"

"You mean the man who tootled the tandem horn?"

"Yes. He married his agent's daughter.

He was going fast to the bowwows before I went to India. I never saw such a change in a fellow —never."

"Sir Geoffrey did say something. What was it? Oh yes. He pointed him out as a man who had paid a preposterous price for twins."

"I wonder what father would be willing to pay for another son."

"Or a grandson," murmured Margot.

She was very nice and sympathetic after this, the more so, perhaps, as unconsciously he made plain his position—that of dependence on his father. Margot smiled when he prattled of living on his pay in another regiment. And yet the boy's unworldliness, his faith in true love and hard work (which he knew so little about), caught oddly at her heart. She knew that she had been right in one thing, her "flair" had not failed her—he sat upright in his saddle, a gallant gentleman, a credit to his Order.

We must admit that she dealt kindly with him under considerable provocation to be unkind. Sensible of this, he showed his gratitude, almost too effusively. But he had wit enough not to praise his ladylove. The adjectives still rankled—pretty—good—amiable.

They rode into the stable-yard.

CHAPTER XIV

"CREEP—crane—go canny!"

This policy was not to Lionel's taste. Hamlin, too, would abhor it, wax sour under it, suppress pride and wrath till they might break bonds and run amok. Under the suspense of waiting, Euphrosyne would languish.

But what else could be done?

The Fates, not Lionel, answered the insistent question.

Upon the Tuesday afternoon the Squire went a-fishing by himself, too perturbed of mind to seek any company save that of his own thoughts. One thing—quite enough—he knew. The boy had not "gone for" Margot. None the less, they remained on easy, intimate terms with each other. But at dinner, after the hunt, Margot had spoken of leaving on the following Wednesday. The Squire was a stickler for keeping social engagements; such engagements were made, of course, by a young lady of quality many weeks ahead. Had he received from Lionel, over their wine, some intimation that all was well, he would have been quite satisfied. But why did the boy hold his tongue? What ailed him? Lady Pomfret was solemnly interrogated. Let her hazard

some reasonable conjecture! She presented one, tentatively, placidly, and exasperatingly. The young people might wish to remain simply and enduringly—*friends*. The Squire was much ruffled, purged his mind drastically, dropped an oath, and apologised. He kept on repeating himself: "She wants him, I tell you. She was ripe for the pluckin' a week ago. That my son should be a laggard——!" His wife consoled him with the assurance that no man could read a maid's heart. "I read yours," he affirmed. She smiled at him. He kissed her and went his way.

Lionel caught Joyce alone for a few blessed minutes. She had told the Parson.

"What did he say, my angel?"

"He was wonderful," she sighed. "I was right to tell him."

"Of course you were," he exclaimed fervently. "Will it hurt you to tell me exactly what he said about—about me—and father?"

"He anticipates grave trouble. I'll tell you every word, when——"

"When?"

"When the trouble is over. He would rather not see you yet. His position is——"

"Humiliating! When I look at you——!"

"I don't look my best this morning, a bedraggled thing!"

To this he replied vehemently:

"Joyce, my blessed girl, nothing can cheapen you or your father. Not prejudice, nor discourtesy—if it should come to that—nor

injustice. I have told Margot. She was very sympathetic. Of course, she always regarded me as a friend. She will help, if she can. Her advice—and, mind you, she's a dasher—is: *Creep —crane—go canny!* Father's absurd position can't be carried by storm. I shall undermine the fortress. That will take time."

"Yes; but I warn you father won't wait too long."

"I count on Fishpingle. If you could have seen his dear old face when I told him! We shall collogue, I promise you."

He returned home, champing the curb which circumstance imposed.

After tea, when the Squire betook himself to the river, Margot sat, as usual, upon the lawn, with Lady Pomfret. Lionel slipped away to Fishpingle's room. "Colloguing," in his present feverish condition, soothed him. To Fishpingle he could exhibit flowers of speech, nosegays of pretty sentiment. And he could talk emphatically of the future, the simple life full of costless pleasures, dignified by steady work, by the determination to solve Moxon's problem, to make Pomfret land pay. Fishpingle nodded approvingly, making happy suggestions, collaborating whole-heartedly.

In this agreeable fashion an hour or more may have passed away. Suddenly they heard the Squire's voice in the courtyard, loud and clear. He was rating the egregious Bonsor.

"I tell you, man, this is your damned carelessness. Unless I give my personal attention

to every detail, things go to blazes. I am surrounded by a pack of fools."

Bonsor's voice mumbled a reply. Fishpingle said quietly:

"The Squire has not caught any fish."

Sir Geoffrey stumped in, fuming and fussing. Fishpingle rose to relieve him of rod, creel, and landing-net. Lionel said pleasantly:

"Anything wrong, father?"

"Everything," snapped the angry man. "Tuesday is my unlucky day. I believe I was born on a Tuesday."

Fishpingle politely corrected him.

"No, Sir Geoffrey. You were born on a Wednesday, at 1.45 a.m."

The Squire turned to Lionel.

"I lost two beauties, and broke the tip of my rod."

Fishpingle assured him that the tip could be mended in ten minutes. The Squire fumed on:

"Four thoroughbred pigs out of the new litter are dead. Mother overlaid 'em. There are moments when I wish my mother had overlaid me. Bonsor tells me we are nearly out of coal, Ben."

"I warned you, Sir Geoffrey, that we were running short a fortnight ago."

"You didn't. If you had, I should have ordered a fresh supply by return of post. Bonsor says that no coal has been ordered, which proves conclusively that you did not tell me."

Lionel interrupted.

"But he did, father. Fishpingle told you

in my presence, just after luncheon, as you and I were going to look at the horse I rode yesterday."

Sir Geoffrey glared at both butler and son.

"Just like him," he snorted. "Ben knows perfectly well that a new horse, if he's a decently bred 'un, drives everything else out of my head. Order the coal, Ben. Wire for a truck."

"Very good, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire crossed to the hearth and sat down in Fishpingle's big chair. He frowned portentously, muttering:

"I am most confoundedly upset."

"I didn't mean to upset you, Sir Geoffrey."

"Tchah! I'm not speaking of the coal, nor the pigs. This is Tuesday. Does Alfred go out on Tuesday?"

"I let him go this afternoon, Sir Geoffrey."

"Did you know that Tuesday was Prudence Rockley's afternoon off?"

"No, Sir Geoffrey. Mrs. Randall lets Prudence go out, if there is no pressing work."

The Squire stamped his foot.

"Pressin' work. Ha—ha! Hit the right word, for once. Very pressin' work, b' Jove! In defiance of my orders, I caught Alfred and Prudence kissin' each other—under my very nose. Pressin' work, indeed. They skedaddled. Hunted cover. Spoiled my sport, I tell you. I couldn't get out a clean line. Are they in now?"

"I think so, Sir Geoffrey."

"Send for 'em—at once. Bring 'em here.

Don't stare at me, boy! I'm not suffering from suppressed gout, as you think. I'll stop these gallivantings."

"You have often said that you liked our men and maids to have a whiff of fresh air between tea and dinner."

Fishpingle had left the room. The Squire stamped again.

"I did. And this is what comes of thinking for others."

"Father——?"

"What is it?"

"Go easy with them! They love each other dearly."

"Good God! They're first-cousins, boy. Not a word! Stay here! You shall see me deal with 'em."

"But——"

"Not a word," roared the Squire.

Lionel lit a cigarette, frowning, conscious that he was being treated as a child, resenting it, anxious to plead for the lovers, anticipating "ructions," and condemned to be present, a silenced witness. Fishpingle came back, followed by Prudence and Alfred, looking very sheepish and red. Alfred was in livery. Prudence had not changed a very dainty little frock.

"Stand there!" commanded the autocrat.

The blushing pair stood still in front of the table, facing the Squire, who sat erect in his chair, assuming a judicial impassivity, as became a Justice of the Peace and a Chairman of the

Board of Guardians. He addressed Fishpingle, coldly:

"Now, Ben, did I, or did I not, give you a message some two months ago to be delivered by you to Prudence?"

"You did, Sir Geoffrey."

"Kindly repeat it."

"You instructed me to tell Prudence to find another young man."

Lionel tried to restrain himself, and failed lamentably.

"Oh, I say!"

The Squire preserved his magisterial tone and deportment.

"You say nothing, Lionel. This is my affair. Now, Ben, I'll lay ten to three you never delivered my message."

"That he did," whimpered Prudence. "In this very room, too."

"Um! I beg your pardon, Ben. Don't sniff, Prudence! And answer my questions truthfully. If that message was delivered, how dare you kiss Alfred in my shrubberies?"

Prudence pulled herself together, meeting the Squire's inflamed glance.

"Me and Alferd 'll be man an' wife, come Michaelmas."

"In—deed? Cut and dried, is it?"

He apostrophised Alfred, who may have misinterpreted a derisive but calm inflection. Alfred brightened, his voice was eager and propitiating.

"If so be, Sir Geoffrey, as you meant what

you wrote in the newspapers. Give me mort o' comfort. 'Twas in the *Times*. Mr. Fishpingle 'll have it. He keeps everything you write, he do."

The Squire stared at his footman. Lionel said quietly :

"What did Sir Geoffrey write, Alfred ?"

Alfred assumed a pose acquired in the National schools, head erect, hands at side, feet close together.

"Sir Geoffrey said that the sooner a man o' twenty-five and a fine young maid of eighteen set about providin' legitimate an' lawful subjects for the king, the better. An' more than that. I got the piece by heart, I did. He said that in Nether-Applewhite he paid a premium for such there matches—a lil' cottage, look, and a lil' garden, and a fi'-pun' note, so be as God A'mighty sent twins."

Prudence blushingly rebuked him.

"*Alferd !*"

"His brave words, Prue, not mine."

Sir Geoffrey coughed. That a servant of his should memorise his prose might be deemed flattering and eminently proper. He said graciously :

"I meant 'em. There is a cottage for you——"

"May the Lard bless 'ee, Sir Geoffrey !"

Sir Geoffrey raised a minatory finger.

"Provided, mark you, that each marries—somebody else."

This was too much for the feelings of an

inflamed maid. Prudence confronted the autocrat with heaving bosom and sparkling eyes.

"If so be, as I can't have Alferd, I'll die a sour old maid, I will."

Her outburst provoked the Squire to unmagisterial wrath. He raised his voice and a dominating hand.

"Hold your tongue! We have had quite enough of this. I can't prevent Alfred marrying you, you little baggage, but if he does he must find another place, and a cottage in a parish which doesn't belong to me."

Prudence's courage and defiance oozed from her. With a wailing cry, she flung herself into Fishpingle's arms.

"Uncle Ben——!"

Fishpingle comforted her.

"There, there, my maid! You obey me. I tell you to go to your room and have a nice comfortable cry. Off with you!"

The Squire added a word:

"And keep out of my shrubberies, confound you!"

Prudence left Fishpingle's arms, and turned to the Squire, with tears rolling down her cheeks. She said defiantly:

"I know where I be going—quick!"

She bolted, slamming the door.

"The minx! Where is she going?"

Fishpingle couldn't inform him. Possibly to her mother, who was head laundry-maid. The Squire addressed Alfred.

"You can go, Alfred, but I warn you not to

follow that pert, ungrateful girl. And—in case you should be tempted to disobey me, bring me at once a large whisky and soda."

"Bring two, Alfred," added Lionel.

Alfred obeyed, crestfallen, and sullen. As soon as he left the room, Lionel began to protest:

"Look here, father, this is too hot, I——"

The Squire smiled blandly.

"Tch! Tch! All this has been intensely disagreeable to me, boy. But, dammy! I must practise what I preach. Sound eugenics. No in-and-in breeding. Ben here agrees with me, don't you, old friend?"

"No, Sir Geoffrey."

The astonished Squire gripped hard the arms of his chair.

"Wha-a-at?" he roared.

Fishpingle replied deliberately:

"I do not agree with you, Sir Geoffrey. I repeat what I said before. The strain in this case is clean and strong on both sides. In my judgment Alfred and Prudence are specially designed by Providence to practise what you preach, and to provide His Majesty in due time with legitimate and lawful subjects."

Sir Geoffrey rose majestically. He approached his butler. He surveyed him from head to heel. Upon his red face amazement wrestled with incredulity. With an immense effort, he controlled himself, saying calmly:

"You mean, Ben, that you—*you* oppose my wishes?"

"In this instance, yes."

Alfred entered with the cooling drinks. Sir Geoffrey gasped out:

"I have never been so—so——"

"Thirsty, Sir Geoffrey?" suggested Fishpingle, as Alfred presented the salver.

The Squire seized a glass with a trembling hand, completed the sentence, "in all my life."

"Nor I," said Lionel, taking the other glass.

Alfred withdrew. Sir Geoffrey tossed off his drink, nearly choking. As he slammed the empty glass upon the table, he exploded.

"You—traitor!"

Lionel slammed down his empty glass.

"*Traitors*, father; I'm with Fishpingle, if an honest opinion is called treachery."

"Good God! My own son against me." But, quickly, he moderated his tone, saying testily: "There, there! 'Traitor' was too strong an expression. I withdraw it. But I stand firm on the other matter. I repeat: Prudence and Alfred are too near of kin."

Lionel answered respectfully:

"You, sir, have proved Fishpingle's case up to the hilt."

"Eh? What d'ye mean, boy?"

"Fishpingle will read you an extract from an article written by you on this subject, won't you, old chap?"

"With pleasure, Master Lionel."

He crossed to his bookcase, opened a drawer below it, turned over some papers, and fished out a scrap-book.

"Something I wrote. All right! I stand by my own words—always have done. No chopping and changing for me!"

Fishpingle found the page and the clipping. He put on his spectacles.

"Hurry up," enjoined the Squire. "What an old dodderer!"

Fishpingle began:

"Under date April the first——"

"Is this a stupid joke, Ben?"

"That happens to be the date, Sir Geoffrey. The article was written by you some fifteen years ago."

"Um! Ancient history. I refuse to accept unqualified responsibility for what I wrote fifteen years ago."

Lionel laughed. He felt that the tension was relieved.

"I say—play cricket, father!"

"Cricket? How the doose, boy, can you remember what I wrote when you were a lad of ten?"

"Simply because Fishpingle read that clipping to me about a week ago."

The Squire growled.

"This looks like a damned conspiracy."

At this moment Lady Pomfret sailed into the room, followed by Margot. Prudence had fled, weeping, to her kind mistress. Regardless of a visitor, the maid had told her piteous tale, entreating help, first aid which couldn't wait. Lady Pomfret had hesitated, knowing her man. Then Margot had interposed. "L'union fait la

force." Let them seek the autocrat together. Let women's wit and tact prevail! She ached for the encounter. Together they would triumph gloriously. Lady Pomfret yielded reluctantly to importunity. Prudence raced back to Alfred.

Lady Pomfret smiled at her lord.

"Dear Geoffrey, we have just seen poor little Prudence Rockley."

Margot, in her sprightliest tone, added incisively:

"Yes; and we've nipped in to fight under Cupid's banner." She advanced to the charge gaily. "Now, you must listen to—me."

But Sir Geoffrey was proof against alluring wiles.

"Must I?" he said stiffly.

"Why, of course, you must. Dear Lady Pomfret was dragged here by me. Frown at me, not at her. I plead for youth and beauty."

Just then, Youth and Beauty peered in through the open window. It was daring, audacious, a violation of inviolate tradition. But what will you? The hapless pair were beside themselves with misery and despair. Each gripped the other's hand.

Sir Geoffrey was hard put to it. Courtesy to a guest strained him to breaking-point. He bowed silently. Margot continued:

"You are a true lover, Sir Geoffrey. You must know that love is free."

The Squire shied at the adjective. And this interruption had befogged him.

"Free love," he repeated. "God bless my soul! What next?"

Lady Pomfret explained, deprecatingly.

"Margot means, Geoffrey, that love is free to choose, to select——"

Margot continued with animation:

"Jill has the right to pick her Jack. If Jack is willing"—she paused and looked at Fishpingle —"and I understand that he is——"

Alas! Poor Alfred! The question undid him. Had he remained silent, Margot might have triumphed. The Squire was melting beneath her fiery glances. He wanted to please her. He loved to confer a favour royally. But a voice from outside froze the very cockles of his heart.

"Aye. That I be, my lady."

Such an interruption, at such a time, from such a source, filled the Squire with fury. He roared out:

"Ben."

"Sir Geoffrey?"

"Discharge that impertinent rascal at once."

Lady Pomfret spoke and looked her dismay.

"Oh, Geoffrey! Who will wait at dinner? Poor Charles is so inefficient."

Sir Geoffrey lowered his voice.

"Discharge him after dinner. Pay him his wages, and send him packing."

Another voice floated in through the window.

"I go with Alfie, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire, fulminating, strode to the window. Youth and Beauty had vanished. He came back, as Lady Pomfret observed disconsolately:

"Oh dear! Oh dear! We shall soon be left without servants."

Everybody was upset. For once Margot forgot her tact. She said with acerbity:

"But really this is—feudal. It reeks of the Middle Ages." Then, regaining her sprightliness, she smiled: "Sir Geoffrey, do come back to the twentieth century."

Lady Pomfret smiled faintly.

"Please do, dear Geoffrey."

"Never! What unspeakable insolence!"

"Poor things!" sighed Lady Pomfret. "They forgot us because we had driven them to think only of themselves."

Her charming voice, her kind, pleading eyes, her gracious gestures, were not wasted upon the Squire. Lionel, in a cheerful tone, said to the company generally:

"Fishpingle was about to read us something of father's, something eugenic and relevant."

Sir Geoffrey protested:

"Um! Ha! In the presence of ladies——" He cleared his throat.

Margot said happily:

"I shall listen with pleasure to anything Sir Geoffrey has written."

Lionel turned to Fishpingle, who held the clipping in his hand.

"Go ahead, Fishpingle! Please remember,

Margot, that my father is astride his favourite hunter. Now for it!"

Fishpingle, thus adjured, and after a glance at Sir Geoffrey, began to read aloud: "'The question of in-and-in breeding——'"

"Gracious!" ejaculated Lady Pomfret.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon?"

"How well you read!" said Margot. "Pray go on, you delightful person!"

Fishpingle went on: "'The question of in-and-in breeding, where the parent stock on both sides is vigorous and healthy, can only be answered by experiment. As a successful breeder of cattle, horses, and hounds, I am strongly in favour of it. If History is to be believed, the Pharaohs of the earlier dynasties, all of them pre-eminent for strength of mind and body, married their own sisters."

Lady Pomfret interrupted quietly:

"I think that will do, Ben."

"Very good, my lady."

Lionel, watching his sire's expression, confident that the clouds were rolling away, said, with a laugh:

"Father, you're down and out."

"I never wrote it," said the Squire, emphatically.

"Then who did? You signed it."

"Ben wrote it," declared the Squire.

"Ben?" echoed Lady Pomfret. "Did you write it, Ben?"

Fishpingle replied modestly:

"The sentence about the Pharaohs is mine,

my lady. I happened to be reading about them at the time. And when I typed Sir Geoffrey's manuscript—— "

Margot murmured :

" What a paragon ! A butler who does typewriting."

Sir Geoffrey said hastily :

" It amuses Fishpingle. He's what we call in the Forest a ' caslety man.' Yes, yes, I remember. He slipped in that paragraph about the Pharaohs."

" It hammered your point well home," said Lionel.

" It did," said Margot. " Now, Sir Geoffrey, haul down your flag ! Make this nice young couple happy, to please me."

" And me, Geoffrey."

The Squire, at bay, pressed too hard, and seeing, possibly, derisive gleams in more than one pair of eyes, said curtly :

" I propose to be master in my own house."

Margot compressed her lips. She admitted candidly that any woman may be snubbed once. It is her own fault if she courts a second rebuff. She laughed acidulously, said very chillingly, " Oh, certainly," and left the room. Lady Pomfret approached her husband, and laid her hand upon his sleeve.

" Prudence is Ben's kinswoman, very dear to him. If Ben approves this match, what business is it of ours ? "

Sir Geoffrey answered obstinately :

" They were born and bred in my parish,

this impudent couple. They can do what they like—out of it."

Lady Pomfret kept her temper admirably. If she travelled along lines of least resistance, she reached her goal eventually. She turned to Fishpingle with a little rippling laugh:

"Ah, well, I leave the Squire with you, Ben. We know—don't we?—how kind he can be."

She went out. Lionel opened the door for his mother, closed it behind her, and came back. Obviously, he was losing control of his temper. His fingers were clenched; an angry light sparkled in his eyes; he carried a high head. Sir Geoffrey saw none of this. He was glaring at Fishpingle. The autocrat addressed his butler:

"I am furious with you, sir. Thanks to you and your precious *kinswoman* I have been forced, sorely against the grain, to refuse a guest a favour, and, worse, to rebuke my dear wife."

Lionel cast discretion to the void. The Pomfret temper might be deemed an heirloom. It slumbered in Lionel. Now—it woke.

"This is damnable."

The Squire could hardly believe his ears. When he turned upon his son, his eyes, also, seemed hardly to be trusted. Lionel was positively glaring at him. Rank mutiny! Riot!

"How dare you take this tone, boy?"

Lionel attempted no apology.

"I would remind you, sir, that I am a man, and not only your son, but your heir. If I survive you, which at one time didn't seem likely, this

property and its responsibilities must come to me. I have a right—indeed, sir, it is my duty —to protest against an act of injustice and cruelty."

"Leave the room, sir. This is intolerable."

Lionel boiled over. Behold the creeper at awkward fences! Behold the craner! Fishpingle, standing behind the Squire, hoisted warning signals. In vain. A hot-headed youth was riding hard for a fall. He met his father's eyes defiantly.

"I am not blind, sir, to your plans for my future. You intended me, your own son, to be a pawn in your hands."

Fishpingle groaned.

"Master Lionel——!"

"Fishpingle, I have been a coward. I asked for your help. I wanted you to plead my cause, to use your influence——"

The Squire started.

"Influence? You asked another man to influence—me. Are you stark mad? And what cause, pray, is he to plead? Answer me."

Fishpingle stretched out his hands.

"Master Lionel——"

"Hold your damned tongue, Ben!"

"Please," said Lionel.

Fishpingle crossed slowly to the window, and looked out over the park. Two men whom he had loved and served were standing upon the edge of an abyss and he was powerless to avert disaster. His spirit travailed within him, bringing forth nothing. He heard Sir Geoffrey say, in a frozen voice:

"I am waiting, Lionel, for an explanation, and an apology."

The son answered in the same hard, cold tone:

"I am too proud, father, to explain a fact, which needs no explanation and no apology. Last Sunday afternoon I asked Joyce Hamlin to become my wife, and she did me the honour of accepting me."

Without pausing to watch the effect of this stunning blow, he turned and left the room. Fishpingle remained at the window.

CHAPTER XV

Sir Geoffrey stood still for a moment after his son had left the room. Then he sat down in the big armchair, staring vacantly at the hearth. His premonition had come true—the boy had stuck a knife into him. Almost in a whisper he murmured hoarsely, "Lionel!"

Fishpingle turned. "Shall I call Master Lionel back?"

"No," said the Squire.

He spoke drearily. The bloom of his fine maturity seemed to fade. He looked pale and haggard. Fishpingle had a disconcerting glimpse of old age, of old age in its most sorrowful and touching manifestation, solitary, disconsolate, apathetic. The Squire leaned his head upon his hand, as if the weight of thoughts were insupportable.

Outside a bird twittered monotonously—some house sparrow bent upon disturbing the peace of the swallows, migrants whom he regarded as trespassers.

"Damn that sparrow!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey.

He sat upright; the sanguine colour flowed back into his clean-shaven cheeks. Perhaps the

consoling reflection stole into his mind that matters might be worse: the boy might have married the Parson's daughter secretly. He said testily to Fishpingle:

"Don't gape at me like that! Keep your pity for those who may need it."

Fishpingle obeyed. His face slowly hardened into the impassive mask of the well-trained servant. The Squire continued less testily but with reproachful mockery:

"So you, *you*, the man I have trusted for fifty years, were chosen by my son to plead a cause which he hadn't the pluck to plead for himself."

"Nothing was settled about that, Sir Geoffrey."

"Tchah! He went to you, not to his mother—I lay my life on it—nor to me. Why? Because, obviously, you were on his side, siding, b' Jove! against—*me*."

"I side with Master Lionel, Sir Geoffrey."

"That's honest, at any rate. We know where we are. Now, Ben, you shall plead his case in his absence. I will listen as patiently as may be. Begin!" Fishpingle opened his lips and closed them. "Ha! You are silent because there is nothing to say."

"No. Because there is so much—all, all that I have learnt during those fifty years, all that I hold most dear, most sacred——."

His voice died away. The Squire was not unmoved. He cleared his throat vigorously and said kindly:

"Take your time. This shall be threshed out fairly between us. Sit down! Keep your hands quiet, Ben. When you fidget, it distracts me."

"I would rather stand, Sir Geoffrey."

"Do as you please." With indulgent irony he added, "The counsel for the defence addresses the Court standing."

Fishpingle moved a little nearer. He spoke very slowly, as a man speaks who has some long-considered message to deliver.

"Master Lionel, before he went to India, did not expect to survive you."

The Squire moved uneasily. Fishpingle had recalled cruel anxieties never quite forgotten, what may be termed the unpaid bills of life pigeon-holed, put aside for Fate and Fortune to settle. He replied, however, with decision:

"He has grown into a strong man."

"Has he? Are you quite sure of that? I would give my life to be sure. He may live long if he marries the right woman. Is Lady Margot the right woman, Sir Geoffrey?"

"Yes."

"I wish with all my heart I could think so."

"How can you know all that such a marriage would mean to me, and this big property, and him?"

"I have thought of all that, Sir Geoffrey. Indeed, indeed, I have thought of little else since her ladyship first came here. She is a lady of quality——"

"Every inch of her."

"And very clever. She would push the fortunes of her husband. There is a barony in abeyance which could be terminated in favour of her son, if she had a son. Her money would lift the mortgage which cripples the estate. Her money would build new cottages, fertilise our thin soil, put farming upon a higher plane, transform Nether-Applewhite into what has been the dream of your life—and mine—a model village."

The Squire stared at him. Fishpingle's powers of speech had affected him before, but never so convincingly. He said curtly:

"You have the gift of the gab, Ben. God knows where you get it from. More, you have the knack of reading my mind, of echoing my thoughts, using the very phrases that are mine."

"Everything I have said is so obvious."

"Obvious? Um! Is that another stab in the back? Well, I am obvious. I despise twisting and wriggling. You have left out the most obvious thing. And I dislike mentioning it. Her little ladyship cottoned to the boy. She wants him, or she did want him, b' Jove! And now, this girl, this Radical parson's daughter without a bob, without any breeding, not much better than any blooming, red-cheeked milk-maid, has undone all my work. What cursed spell has she cast?"

"Nature cast the spell, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire began to fume again, frowning and pulling at his ample chin.

"Nature——! Aided and abetted by you. Rank sentimentalist you are, and always were. I have the obvious" (the word had rankled) "common sense to scrap sentiment. Do you remember those cows, that half-bred herd I inherited with other disabilities? My lady wanted me to keep them."

"Bless her!"

"And you sided with her."

"Did I?"

"Of course you did."

Fishpingle smiled faintly. He crossed to one of the tallboys standing in an alcove and pulled open a drawer. The Squire growled.

"What are you up to now?"

"I want to look at an old diary."

He pulled out half a dozen thin books, selected one, and turned over the pages. The Squire watched him with exasperation.

"What dawdling ways!"

"Here we are, Sir Geoffrey. Five and twenty years ago, when Master Lionel was short-coated."

"Get forrard, you skirter!"

Fishpingle put on his spectacles, and read aloud: "'Heated argument with the Squire. He and my lady insisted upon keeping our dairy cows. I floored him with the milk returns——'"

"Floored me?"

Fishpingle continued placidly:

"'—and enjoyed a small triumph. The cows are to be fattened for the butcher, and the dairy will show a profit instead of a loss."

He replaced the diary and removed his spectacles. The Squire muttered protest:

"As usual, Ben, you wander from the point, you shifty old fox. Why jaw about cows? Now—what have you against Lady Margot?"

"Will she be happy here in this quiet backwater?"

"Tchah! My son's wife—when I'm gone—will live where it's her duty to live—amongst her husband's people."

"Perhaps. Master Lionel takes after my lady. He's incapable of unkindness or selfishness."

"Thank you, Ben. I'm allowing you great latitude. Go on! Take advantage of it!"

"If Master Lionel married Lady Margot, he would try to make her happy. He would live most of the year in London. He would share her life, and that life is one of constant excitement and change. She has been happy here for three weeks, because this is a change. Would she ever take my lady's place? Never!"

He spoke with fire. The Squire lay back in his chair, gently twiddling his thumbs. In his opinion no woman could take his wife's place, but what of that? None the less, mention of Lady Pomfret smoothed out some wrinkles. He smiled beatifically, lifted above himself.

"Who could? My lady is unique. Why make these foolish comparisons? As for London—— Well, well, I should like to see the boy in Parliament. Let him march with these cursed democratic times, and strike a shrewd

blow for his order, a blow for the next generation."

Fishpingle played his trump card.

"The next generation? Lady Margot has no love of children."

"What d'ye mean? How dare you say that? How on earth do you know?"

"We have talked together."

"About her children——!" He held up his hands. "What are we coming to? I ask Heaven the question."

"I can answer it, Sir Geoffrey. I know my place, and her ladyship knows hers—none better. I did take the liberty of trying to interest her in Nether-Applewhite children. And then she told me quite frankly that children bored her. I remember her words—yes. 'I can endure a clean child for ten minutes. Babies in the mass make me think kindly of Herod.'"

"Her ladyship, Ben, likes a joke with an edge to it. You wait till she has babies of her own."

"One might have to wait long for that. Lady Margot's family is almost extinct. A great-uncle died in a private asylum."

"I see you've been nosin' about. Just like you. All old families have their skeletons."

Fishpingle, carried out of himself for a moment, like the hapless Alfred, forgot his place, as he muttered:

"Yes, yes, her ladyship is very thin."

The Squire jumped up.

"Damn you, Ben, that is the last straw. I

have sat here listening to your mumbling with a patience and good temper wasted upon a very thankless fellow. You know best what you owe me and mine."

He paused. Fishpingle bowed superbly.

"I do, Sir Geoffrey."

"You are never so irritating as when you force me to say things intensely disagreeable. I hate to rub it in, but I am Squire of Nether-Applewhite and you are my butler. As my butler I expect you to consider my wishes, and to carry them out to the best of your ability."

"I have tried to do so, Sir Geoffrey."

"Up to a point—up to a point. I admit it. Let us have the facts, say I! And then deliver judgment on them. You have aided and abetted two servants in this establishment who are flagrantly disobeying me. And you have aided and abetted Master Lionel, with the knowledge and therefore with the deliberate intention of upsetting other plans which I had confided to you. If I am wrong, pray correct me."

Thus the magistrate, using the words and gestures of authority. As he spoke a quaint benevolent despotism illuminated his sturdy face. How kind he could be to his dependents when they kow-towed to his rule both wife and butler knew. And the memory of countless petty sacrifices which had truly endeared him to "his people" moved Fishpingle profoundly. But his own intimate knowledge of those people, a knowledge so seldom gleaned by the Overlord, the vivid, intimate experience of fifty years, had

taught him inexorably that such powers as the Squire and his like exercised were a wastage of vital force, misdirected energy which, in the fullness of time, must defeat its own purposes. And this, he had slowly come to realise, was the underlying tragedy of the countryside. With this realisation marched its corollary. The authority of the Squire, vested by immemorial custom in him, was, in turn, passed on by him to the farmers who used it or abused it according to their lights. And the farmers, with rarest exceptions, united energies to maintain ever-weakening positions against those beneath them. If prosperity followed a generous use of such power, the result, even then, was disastrous to the labourer and his family. He lost initiative, foresight, any desire to rise and better his humble condition. When he rebelled, when he decided to tear himself loose from emasculating influences, what could he do? Emigrate. And England loses a Man.

Fishpingle had studied carefully the books and pamphlets lent to Lionel. As he admitted, they were one-sided, a compilation of hideous grievances, valuable as such, almost valueless from the point of view of reconstruction. The "three acres and a cow" school filled this wise old man with derisive contempt. To divide great estates into small holdings of individual ownership might seem a sound solution to economists who wrote incisive articles in rooms littered with works of reference. The man on the spot was not so optimistic. He had seen

the experiment tried with allotments. The labourer lacked knowledge; he muddled about with soils, just as his wife muddled about in the kitchen, spoiling good food. No reform, so Fishpingle believed, could come from below. Light must shine from above.

If the Squire could be led to see clearly the issues he had raised.

If Authority, in fine, could impose its own limitations?

Was it possible to answer the stern indictment brought against himself, as steward and butler? Obviously, the Squire considered his own position to be impregnable. And yet, alas! it was built upon foundations now crumbling away. If such foundations could not be replaced with sound masonry, the great fabric reared upon them would fall in irretrievable ruins, serving, like the feudal castles, as a landmark of the past.

He said with dignity:

"You are not wrong in that, Sir Geoffrey. I don't deny these charges."

"Good! You are an honest man, Ben. Acknowledge frankly that your sentiment, your affection for these young people—I include Master Lionel—have warped your judgment and seduced you from your duty and loyalty to me, and, dammy! I'll wipe out the offence. Come, come!"

His tone was genial and persuasive, so kindly that Fishpingle wrestled with the temptation to "creep" and "crane." Perhaps the thought of

Lionel's "lead" over a stone wall fortified him. He drew back from the proffered right hand of a fellowship he prized inordinately.

"What? You refuse?"

"You called me honest, Sir Geoffrey. I hope humbly that I am so. I am your butler, but my conscience is my own. I hold firmly to the conviction that you have no right, granting that you possess the power, to interfere with these young lives. I say less than I feel out of the respect and affection I bear you."

The Squire swore to himself. If Fishpingle had beheld him, not as the friend of many years, not even as the kindly master, but as an abstraction, a sort of composite photograph of all overlords, so Sir Geoffrey beheld Fishpingle as the composite servant, the subordinate, the underling. To be quite candid, he regarded the Parson, *his* parson, in much the same light. There had been moments, few and far between, when the Squire had taken himself censoriously to task. As a rule, such disagreeable self-analysis forced itself upon him when he was dealing with matters outside his particular jurisdiction, county matters rather than parochial. He had marked the effect of power exercised misapprehendingly, with insufficient technical knowledge behind it. And if he happened to be a party to any such blundering, he felt very sore. Let it be remembered, also, that his father died when he was a boy. He had come into his kingdom upon his twenty-first birthday. Comparing him with neighbouring magnates, he shone conspicuous as a man

who did his duty, and was comfortably warmed by the fire of self-righteousness. As a soldier, let it be added, he would have obeyed any order from his commanding officer. On Authority's shoulders be the blame, if such order were contrary to the King's Regulations. In this case he assumed full responsibility before God and man. From the pinnacle upon which, so he devoutly believed, God and man had placed him, he beheld Fishpingle as a faithless servant, a rank mutineer.

He said freezingly:

"Very well, sir. I shall deal with my son myself. I shall tell him to-night that under no circumstances will I consent to his marriage with an obscure girl whose father doesn't even bear arms. Ha! I asked him, when he came here, what his coat was, and he replied, laughing in my face, 'My coat, Sir Geoffrey, is *sable*, with collar and cuffs *argent*.' Master Lionel can marry without my consent. Thanks to your encouragement, he is quite likely to do so. He must come here after my death, but not before, sir, not before."

Fishpingle said entreatingly:

"Sleep over it, Sir Geoffrey, I beg you. Miss Joyce is like my dear lady."

"She isn't."

"As you said just now, nobody could be quite like her ladyship. But Miss Joyce has her lamp."

The Squire tartly requested him to explain. Fishpingle allowed his glance to stray to the

photograph upon the mantelshelf. As he spoke he saw his mistress as she had revealed herself to him during nearly thirty years. Her light streamed over the past.

"My lady's lamp, Sir Geoffrey, has burned so steadily. I have never seen it flame or flicker. It throws its beams on others, never on herself. But one knows that she is there, behind her lamp, always the same sweet gracious lady, serene in all weathers; above us, shining down on us, and yet of us."

Sir Geoffrey turned abruptly and went to the window. Fishpingle perceived that he was agitated, touched. He blew his nose with quite unnecessary violence. Then he turned.

"You have described my lady better—I admit it—than I could describe her myself. But Miss Joyce has not her lamp." His voice hardened. "Now, Ben, mark me well. I propose to put down this mutiny with a firm hand." He held it up. "These rioting servants must be brought to heel. You will discharge Alfred after dinner and pay him a month's wages in lieu of notice. You will send Prudence back to her mother to-night. Alfred can leave to-morrow morning. You hear me?"

While he spoke, with increasing emphasis, he marked a subtle but unmistakable change in Fishpingle. The man revealed himself divested of a butler's smug trappings. Any air of subserviency vanished. A stranger, seeing the two men together, facing each other, at issue with each other, would have marked a resemblance,

the stronger because it was of the spirit, not the flesh. In height and build they were much alike, but Fishpingle's head was incomparably the finer.

"I hear you. A hard, cruel man has spoken, not my old master and friend."

"Silence, sir!"

"I thought, I believed, that I knew you. And I did know you once. But you have changed —changed. You are no longer my master. I am no longer your man. Discharge your own servants, Sir Geoffrey Pomfret!"

With shining eyes and features quivering with agitation, he ended upon a clarion note of defiance and wrath. Sir Geoffrey was infinitely the calmer.

"I take you at your word," he said. "I discharge—*you*. For her ladyship's sake, not mine, I ask you to wait upon us at dinner for the last time. To-morrow morning, at ten-thirty, you can bring your books and accounts to my room."

Fishpingle bowed.

Sir Geoffrey waited one moment. Perhaps, at the last, he looked for an apology. None came. Fishpingle stood erect, but less rigid. His indignation passed swiftly. His glance lost its fire; his eyes, still smouldering, assumed a sorrowful expression.

Sir Geoffrey went out.

The clock in the stable-yard chimed and then tolled the hour—seven. Upon the previous Saturday it had rung out with the same solemn note a delightful day.

CHAPTER XVI

LIONEL was clever enough to realise that he had behaved like a fool within five minutes of leaving Fishpingle's room. He hastened to his mother, and, by the luck of things, found her alone. He could see that she was infinitely distressed already, inasmuch as a visitor had been treated with discourtesy. She dwelt on this, not without humour, till Lionel stopped her. His abrupt manner, so unlike him, alarmed her instantly. She put out her hand, as if to ward off the coming blow. He seized it and kissed it. Then she guessed.

But she remained silent, while he told his tale, haltingly, but not inartistically, for climax came at the end. She murmured softly:

"My dear son——!"

He knelt down and laid his throbbing head on her lap. She stroked his hair. He looked up at her.

"Mother, I love her."

She smiled at him.

"So do I. Can you doubt that?"

"No, no. But father——! I have burnt all my boats just when I most needed them. I meant to go slow, to break my news consider-

ately. I have behaved like a madman, irritated and offended him past forgiveness."

He may have hoped that she would deny this. No comforting word dropped from her lips. Never had he seen her face so troubled.

"Have you nothing to say?" he burst out.

She answered gently: "You mustn't hurry me, Lionel. I stand between my husband and my son. I have a duty to each. I tell you this—in small things I can and do influence your father. Dear old Ben can say as much. In matters which touch deeply his pride, his ambition, his inherited instincts and sensibilities, my influence is—negligible. All my life I have known this; all my life I have prayed that no issue might arise between us which would provoke me to—to fight against those instincts, so strong in him, so ineradicable."

"And I have raised that issue."

It was a bitter moment for the young man. Glancing keenly at his mother, he perceived her delicacy, her physical frailty. From her he had inherited a like weakness, which a healthy, sane life had almost eliminated. But he remembered long weary days and sleepless nights when he had suffered grievously from actual incapacity to do things done by strong young men. At Eton he had not been allowed to play football. Later, a long day's hunting tired him terribly. The work at Sandhurst, digging trenches, making bridges, route marches, caused him distress. Perhaps these physical lesions had strengthened his spirit and aroused his sympathy. Any loss

implies some gain. And if the present moment was bitter, knowing, as he did, that he was inflicting cruel anxiety upon a mother ill able to bear it, such bitterness may be well deemed trivial compared to that immeasurable and inexpiable remorse which tears the hearts of strong men, when they realise that the sympathy and tenderness long overdue to some beloved creature has been aroused too late, when the kind familiar tones are hushed for ever.

Lady Pomfret assented.

"I shall have to fight for you, Lionel."

"Darling mother, can't you keep out of it?"

"Quite impossible."

Lionel got up and paced the room, a small room adjoining Lady Pomfret's bedroom, much used by her, full of objects which vividly recalled to Lionel his childhood and youth. A tiny chair in which he had sat learning to "read without tears" stood in its old place. In one of the dwarf book-cases were a row of children's books. Photographs of himself at all ages met his eye.

Presently he burst out, as she sat thinking before him:

"Father simply can't resist you."

"Ah! But this isn't altogether that. He will have to fight not so much against you and me, but against himself. Really we are asking him to change his character, his point of view. It is certain that he will definitely refuse to sanction this engagement. And you are dependent on him. Unless I am utterly mistaken he

will bring pressure to bear. Mr. Hamlin will put the same pressure upon Joyce. This is going to be harder upon her, poor dear, than you, because it will be made plain that marriage with you may be so disastrous to you from every material side."

Lionel groaned. Lady Pomfret poured a little balm into his wounds.

"But I will say this. I rejoice, with all my heart, that it is Joyce, not Margot, whom you love. I feared that you might be tempted to take the easy way. You might have been allured by her wit and charm. I am confident that her money did not weigh with you."

"Thank you, mother."

"For the rest, we must be patient with your dear father. You tell me that Margot knows, that she was nice to you. Perhaps, for a few hours, you had better leave your father to me. You ought to see Joyce at once."

"Yes, yes."

"And tell her father frankly the exact position. He will have to fight *his* pride."

They talked on till the stable-clock struck seven. A minute later the Squire's heavy step was heard in the corridor. He entered the room. Probably he expected to find mother and son together. And it says much for his courtesy and breeding that at such a moment he remembered what was due to his wife. He said heavily:

"Well, Mary, I suppose that Lionel has told you his story?"

"Yes."

"He gave me no time to answer him. But I have answered the man whom he asked to act as go-between. Ben pleaded his case, pleaded it better than Lionel could have done. Ben will deliver my answer before he goes."

Lady Pomfret gasped.

"Geoffrey! Is Ben going?"

"Yes."

"After fifty years——!"

"We reached the breaking-point."

He ignored his son entirely. Lionel had wit enough to remain silent. Indeed, the last blow had stunned him, as it had stunned Lady Pomfret. The Squire continued in the same heavy voice:

"Our guest leaves to-morrow. I take it that we can play our parts at dinner as usual. When Margot has gone, this matter can be taken up again."

Lady Pomfret inclined her head. The Squire left the room.

"See Ben at once," said Lady Pomfret. Her voice trembled; her eyes were wet, as she added hastily, "Tell the dear fellow that I am grieved beyond expression, that I—I count upon his patience and forbearance."

"All that and more, mother. My God! that my happiness should be bought at such a cruel price."

Lady Pomfret answered firmly:

"I should reckon no price too great for that, but your happiness is not bought—yet. Leave me alone, my dearest, for a few minutes."

He kissed her tenderly and went.

Dinner was a lamentable affair, although an outsider might have found food for comedy. Alfred, for example, failed to follow the lead of Fishpingle, who conducted himself as usual. Charles, the second footman, looked like a mute at a funeral. Margot, however, shone brilliantly, lightly bridging chasms of silence. Lionel was not present. Just before dinner, Lady Pomfret went to Margot's room, and put before her the facts. Margot shrugged her shoulders :

"But, really, as I said in Fishpingle's room, this is feudal."

"So it is."

"Sir Geoffrey will have to surrender an untenable position."

"I am not sanguine."

That was all, and quite enough, too, as Margot reflected to herself. Whereupon she purged her mind of any desire that Lionel should suffer at his father's hands. Her philosophy, her hatred of what was disagreeable, her temperamental inability to feel very deeply, hastened to her rescue. From some high coign of vantage, she surveyed herself and could smile at her own discomfiture. If she could calm this tempest in a teapot, if she, unaided, could persuade her host that his position was untenable, with what trailing clouds of glory would she speed from Pomfret Court! Twice, between soup and savoury, she made the autocrat laugh. Lady Pomfret divined her kind intentions, and smiled derisively.

The almost interminable dinner ended.

Coffee was served in the Long Saloon. The Squire had just finished his chasse of old brandy, when Fishpingle came in.

"Mr. Hamlin, Sir Geoffrey, wishes to see you. I have shown him into the library."

"Um! I will join Mr. Hamlin at once."

As the door closed behind Fishpingle, the Squire said testily:

"Just like the man. Well, I expected him. And the sooner it's over the better."

He stumped out. Margot, for an instant, wished that she were a housemaid, with no scruples about eavesdropping. Greek was about to meet Greek, and a memorable encounter must take place. Lady Pomfret sat, shading her eyes with her hand, reflecting that men were nearly all alike. How often she had said to her husband, when he was straining at the leash to meet and "down" some obstreperous tenant, "Dear Geoffrey, sleep over it." And as invariably he had replied, "My dear Mary, I can't sleep over this. I shall lie awake all night. I must settle this pestilent fellow." In some such a spirit the Parson had come to Pomfret Court. When had he hesitated to speak his mind? Right was right, so he maintained, and must prevail. But often, too often, right did not prevail. A good cause is like a good horse. It must be ridden with judgment.

"Will there be ructions?" asked Margot, sympathetically.

"I fear so, my dear. How helpless women are at such times!"

"Yes; we co-operate with the forces of gravity, men don't."

Meanwhile the Squire was entering his own room. The Parson greeted him austerely, refusing a cup of coffee and a cigar. He accepted a chair. The Squire sat down at his big desk.

"Lionel dined with us," said the Parson. "Your message was duly delivered to him by Fishpingle."

"Then we both know where we are," said the Squire briskly.

"Do we, Sir Geoffrey?"

A suppressed irony, not lost upon the Squire, informed the question. The Parson had long held the opinion—shared, as we know, by Lady Margot—that the lay rector of his parish wandered in the Middle Ages. Sir Geoffrey believed that his vicar kept company with rogues and vagabonds, whom he described generically as demagogues.

"I know where I am," amended the Squire. "I have often said that I inherited this property with certain disabilities. Amongst them, I take it, *you* would reckon a keen sense of trusteeship, a sense of tradition, a conviction that I must follow where my predecessors have trod before me."

Hamlin smiled grimly.

"You are right. I reckon that sense a disability. But I respect any man's honest convictions. I will be equally frank with you. Had it rested with me, I should have chosen for

my daughter a husband who was entirely free from those same crippling disabilities. I should not have chosen your son."

"Then I repeat—we know where we are."

"Not yet. Where *we* are seems to me of little consequence. I am concerned with others, the position of my daughter and your son. They love each other."

"Can they marry on that alone?"

"Certainly not. I am a proud man, Sir Geoffrey, and I will not inflict pain upon you and mortification upon myself by asking the obvious question: What have you got against my child? I can answer that question myself. I know where she and I stand in your eyes. I remember your expression when I told you that I didn't bear arms. I saw that a stupid jest on my part irritated you. We Hamlins are yeomen. My forefathers wore leather jerkins when yours rode in mail-armour. You prize your descent from them; I prize mine. Let that pass. You are you; I am I. Probably, we shall carry our traditions and predilections to the grave with us. It comes to this. If I put it bluntly, as a yeoman, forgive me. Your parson's daughter is not good enough to marry your son."

The Squire winced a little, reflecting that a yeoman had indeed spoken bluntly. He was tempted to state his own case, but wisely refrained. The Parson—confound him!—chose to put the thing in a nutshell. Let it remain there. Nevertheless, he said courteously:

"I have a genuine affection and respect for

Joyce; but, as you say, I do prize my descent. And I wish to see it continued unblemished."

"Then why did you ask my daughter to your house? Why, feeling as you do, did you expose her to the dangerous possibility of what has actually taken place? Why didn't you, a descendant of knights, protect an innocent, artless girl against the attractiveness and intelligence of your own son?"

The Squire had not expected this. He frowned, pulling at his chin, a trick that indicated perplexity. And a better swordsman might have been sore put to it to parry successfully such a thrust.

The Parson pursued his advantage:

"I hope that I have presented this particular case from a new point of view. And I am aware that your sense of what is due to me as well as to yourself may prevent your answering me. You thought, probably, that your only son shared your sense of what is due to your family. Obviously, he didn't. He is friendly with every pretty girl on your estate. You trusted him, in short."

The Squire nodded. He was not ungrateful at being spared a reply. Hamlin continued in a deeper tone:

"You are your boy's father. I, unhappily, have been constrained to act as father and mother to my girl. She loves Lionel with all her heart and mind. I think that I know something of Lionel. Whatever we may do, Sir Geoffrey, this pair will remain faithful to each

other. We meet to-night upon this common ground: we are two profoundly disappointed men. You made your plans for your boy's marriage; I made plans for my girl. Our hopes are ropes of sand. I urge you solemnly to sanction this marriage, not, I beg you to believe, because of the worldly advantage to Joyce, but because Lionel and she, out of all the world, have chosen each other."

"No," said the Squire.

He rapped out the negative, leaning back in his chair. Much of the starch was out of him; native obstinacy remained. To his credit, let it be recorded that he was not unmoved by Hamlin's simple, sincere statement. He could appreciate—none better—the Parson's transparent honesty. And Hamlin's thrust had almost reached a vital spot. The "no," in fine, would have been taken by a keener psychologist and one less personally interested than Hamlin as a sign of weakness, not strength. It meant really that the Squire was not prepared to argue his case upon ground chosen by Hamlin. Joyce had been made welcome in his house; more, she had worked faithfully and well in his parish; had he foreseen the possibility of an entanglement, he might have kept her at a distance. Such thoughts filtered through his mind. Back of them remained the conviction that he had the *right* to interfere in such matters, that he was exercising—reluctantly, if you will—a cherished privilege. Royalties were constrained by law to marry members of their own caste. The same

law, unwritten, obtained in his order. You broke that law at your peril. Till now the Pomfrets had held it inviolate.

The judicious will agree that the Parson should have "dug himself in" after taking by surprise the first trench. Another man would have done so. Unfortunately, Hamlin's moral courage was habitually exercised at the expense of his judgment. The curt "no" provoked him terribly. It stood for what he despised and condemned in the Squire and others of his class. It meant the scrapping of argument and reason, the abuse of Authority. But he was fully prepared for it. His manner changed instantly. He, too, assumed authority, vested in him by the touch of Apostolic Hands, an authority he held to be indisputable and omnipotent.

"You say 'no,' Sir Geoffrey. Then you force me to speak not as man to man, but as your vicar who would consider himself recreant to his vows if he held his peace at such a moment."

The Squire was "touched," as fencers put it. What did the fellow mean? What the devil was he up to now? Hamlin continued austerely:

"You are a member of my congregation, and as such neither greater nor less than any other in this parish. I tell you plainly that you are in danger of mortal sin, for such unwarrantable interference with the welfare of others, an interference which in the case of Alfred and Prudence Rockley may lead to actual sin, is a crime

against God and man. I charge you to pause before you exercise powers vested in you, as you admit, and for which you will be held ultimately to strict account."

The Squire rose.

"I accept that responsibility, Mr. Hamlin. Good night."

The Parson rose with him. He bowed with grim dignity. The Squire rang the bell and opened the library door. As Hamlin passed through, he said quietly:

"Lionel is passing the night at the Vicarage."

To this the Squire made no reply.

The Parson returned to the Vicarage, where Lionel and Joyce awaited him. One glance at his grim face sufficed. A strong man had been hit hard in a weak place. Possibly, he accepted punishment penitentially. But it was not his way to admit that to others. Joyce flew at him, kissing him tenderly, holding his hands. Lionel felt more in love than ever as he watched a pretty display of sympathy and pity. With much feeling he said regretfully:

"It has been beastly for you, sir."

The Parson was in no mood to tell a tale even if it reflected credit on himself. He set forth the fact that mattered:

"Sir Geoffrey refuses his sanction. I say this for him. He accepts full responsibility. His position is archaic, impregnable on that account to the assault of reason."

Lionel flushed, but he replied eagerly :

"My mother will fight for us. I have her word. I wish she could keep out of it."

"Lady Pomfret will meet what I have met —an obstinate faith, a conscience clearly sincere though perverted. This unconscious abuse of Authority is basic, racial. It is sapping its own foundations everywhere, but how can your father be made to see that?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Nor I," murmured Joyce.

"I suppose," said Lionel, after a pause, "that you, sir, will refuse your sanction?"

"Apart from sentimental considerations, I ask you, Lionel, as I should ask any other man, how do you propose to support a wife if your father cuts off your allowance?"

This talk took place in Hamlin's study, lined with books cheaply bound and constantly read, so different in every aspect from the Squire's library. The Parson had sat down at his desk. Joyce sat near him. Lionel remained standing.

"I am not afraid of poverty," the young man declared stoutly.

"Nor I," murmured Joyce.

"But I am," said the Parson, trenchantly. "It's a bed of nettles."

Lionel spent some time and eloquence in describing what "other fellows" had done in India. With a little "pull" one could get excellent billets, managerships of tea and rubber plantations, married men preferred. The Parson raised a cynical pair of eyebrows.

"Have you any qualifications, special knowledge of tea or rubber?"

"He could learn," pleaded Joyce.

"At another man's expense?"

Lionel winced and said no more. The possibilities of advancement in his profession had been already dismissed as negligible. The Parson spoke less austerely:

"Forgive me, my boy, for putting these questions. I don't doubt either your courage or goodwill. Joyce is worth fighting for. Now, let us suppose that your father surrenders, what then?"

His keen eyes flashed an unmistakable challenge. Lionel answered eagerly:

"I want to live here, as my father's agent. I have everything to learn about the land, but I mean to learn—I can learn. This big property must be made to pay. Hard work, but it's work I shall love."

To the Parson's amazement, he went on to speak of grievances to be redressed, of schemes for the bettering of rural conditions, of a more scientific method of farming. This, as we know, was undiluted Moxon. When interrogated, Lionel frankly admitted as much. Joyce, echoing Moxon, had fired him. As he warmed to his theme, he noticed that the Parson's thoughts seemed to wander. Had he followed those thoughts he, too, might have been amazed. For Hamlin, smarting beneath a sharp disappointment, had wondered why such a man as Moxon had come into Joyce's life merely to

drift out of it. Now that question was answered. When Lionel finished, he said simply:

"Good. If you realise the work to be done, all is well. But some of you country gentlemen, with no training other than that of the Public Schools and Services, seem to think that you can manage big estates efficiently without training; and you arrogate to yourselves powers almost of life and death over your people. That is a monstrous vanity. This blind belief in yourselves will undo you. Why should your so-called rights be used to inflict wrongs upon others? However, light seems to have come to you. Follow it! I'll ask one more question. The application of scientific methods to such farming as is done here means a large outlay. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," said Lionel, eagerly. "With my consent, father and I could sell some heirlooms."

The Parson's eyes and voice softened.

"What? You, a Pomfret, would make that great sacrifice?"

"Gladly."

"Then I sanction your engagement to Joyce. You will have to win your wife with hard work of mind and body. Personally, I believe you can do it."

He grasped Lionel's hand with so convincing a grip that the young man winced. Then he went to bed, leaving Joyce and Lionel together.

CHAPTER XVII

NEXT day, after the shock of battle, Sir Geoffrey felt uncommonly sore and tired. Never had he made so wretched a breakfast! His wife, screened by a large silver urn, poured out his tea in placid silence. This silence was not the least of many flea-bites. After his interview with the Parson, she had asked no questions. The Squire was unable to determine whether this could be deemed sympathy or strategy. For his part, he had said nothing, being well aware that the Parson, in a sense, had carried off the honours of the encounter. This disagreeable impression—for it was no more—might be to his credit, but it in no way bridged the gulf between the two men. Rather the contrary. Nevertheless to repeat to Lady Pomfret the Parson's arguments might provoke discussion of them. Accordingly, when the ladies retired to bed, the Squire went to his room, where he smoked at least three cigars before turning in. Margot discreetly did not appear at breakfast. The Squire marked ravages upon Lady Pomfret's face, as he choked down his food. She looked pale; the lines about her mouth and eyes seemed to have deepened; her

hands, as they poised themselves above cream-jug and sugar-basin, fluttered a little. He tried to read her mind and failed. But he never doubted her for an instant. She would stand shoulder to shoulder with him till the end.

Presently she left the room. The Squire got up and examined her plate and cup. She had eaten nothing, and drunk half a cup of tea! The Squire swore to himself.

He went to the library and sat down at his desk, littered with papers and accounts taken from Fishpingle's room by the ex-butler and placed by him on the desk. The neat files, row upon row, seemed to stand at attention like soldiers on parade awaiting the word of command. The Squire gazed at them frowning helplessly. Presently Fishpingle would present himself and his books. What happened when a butler left a big establishment? There ought to be inspections of silver and wine, and the Lord knows what beside. All that, however, could be taken as done. He picked up a file of accounts. Under a rubber band was a neat slip of paper serving as an index of contents. Fishpingle must have sat up half the night getting these neat files into order.

"Damn!" exclaimed the Squire.

Charles, the second footman, now in supreme command, entered, but remained grinning sheepishly at the door.

"Come in, you fool," said his master testily. "Good Lord! haven't you been taught how to enter a room properly?"

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey." He added deprecatingly: "I know that I be raw, Sir Gaffrey."

This mild answer had its effect.

"True—true. We're at sixes and sevens, Charles."

Much encouraged Charles grinned again.

"Ah-h-h! Flambergasted we all be this marning."

"Well, what is it?"

"Mr. Bonsor, Sir Gaffrey."

"Tell him to wait. I can't see him yet."

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey."

Charles withdrew, still grinning. The Squire muttered to himself: "Yas, Sir Gaffrey! What an oaf!"

Already he felt uncomfortably warm, so he got up and opened a window, staring out of it across the park. When he came back to his desk, he noticed a big ledger upon a chair. He took it up, dipped into it, frowned, and dropped it with a bang upon the carpet. This enormous tome was Fishpingle's petty-cash book. The Squire seized a quill and a sheet of paper. The quill scratched and spattered ink. Sir Geoffrey hurled it over his shoulder and selected another. He began a list, headed: "Secretary—butler—first footman—stillroom maid——"

He laid down his quill, beginning to mutter again, inarticulate growlings. Whose business was it to attend to these domestic duties? He must find that out at once. He rang the bell. After an exasperating delay Charles appeared.

"Why the devil don't you come when I ring, sir?"

"I be single-handed, Sir Gaffery."

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten. My compliments to her ladyship and I wish to see her for a minute."

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey. Be you wanting her old ladyship or her young ladyship?"

"My wife, you idiot!" roared the Squire.

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey."

The Squire paced up and down the room till Lady Pomfret came in. Beads of perspiration stood upon his massive forehead. He wiped them away with an immense bandana. But he smiled pleasantly at his wife as her kind tones fell like dew upon his heated tissues of mind and body.

"You want me, Geoffrey?"

He met her in the middle of the room, took her hand, and kissed it.

"Mary, my dear, I want you desperately. The whole house is upside down, b' Jove! And, by the way, that fellow Charles is a disgrace to our establishment, a clown, an idiot."

"He is your godson, Geoffrey."

She smiled faintly.

"He isn't—*impossible!*"

"I am sure of it."

"We'll see about that." He placed her courteously in a chair, sat down at his desk, opened a drawer and took out a small notebook in which were entered his village godchildren's names. "B' Jove! you're right, Mary. He

is my godson. I shall deal faithfully with him."

Lady Pomfret sighed.

"Please, for my sake, go easy with him. He may give notice, too. I should like to spare you further worry, Geoffrey, but the kitchen-maid and two under housemaids are leaving us."

"What? Why, Mary, why?"

"Out of sympathy, I suppose, for Prudence and Charles. It has never happened to us before, dear, but these—how shall I put it—these sympathetic strikes are not uncommon, I fancy."

Sir Geoffrey's eyes obtruded; so did his chin.

"Strikes, Mary? Did you say—strikes? Good God!"

"Mrs. Randall and Mrs. Mowland are very tearful. We must exercise the greatest forbearance."

The Squire roared out:

"Let the whole ungrateful pack go to blazes. You and I, Mary, will end our days in a nice comfortable hotel."

"My dear Geoffrey——! Are there any nice comfortable hotels left?"

The Squire answered mournfully:

"Not one. Mary, I have never felt so sore, so disillusioned, so profoundly convinced that life under modern conditions is not worth living."

Charles appeared, obviously apologetic.

"What is it now?"

"Mr. Bonsor, Sir Gaffrey. He be due at Home Farm. If so be as you won't see him——"

The Squire turned to his wife.

"I can't see Bonsor this morning. You know, Mary, there is something about Bonsor's face which irritates me beyond endurance. He invariably smiles when things go wrong."

"See him, dear, and get it over."

"Very well. I'll see Mr. Bonsor here and now."

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey."

"And when you are speaking to me, Charles, kindly remove that imbecile grin. You would grin at your own mother's funeral."

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey; I mean, no. Mr. Fishpingle, he did tell me that you fancied a cheerful, upliftin' countenance."

"You take your orders from me for the future."

Charles disappeared. The Squire said entreatingly to Lady Pomfret:

"Don't go, Mary. I'll get rid of Bonsor in two minutes. The fellow has no initiative, none. I have much to say to you. Who engages servants?"

"What servants? I suppose that the master of the house engages his butler. I engage the upper women servants. Mrs. Randall engages the younger maids."

"What a mess we're in, confound it!"

"Alas! yes."

"Have you seen Lionel?"

"No."

"He has the common decency to keep out of my sight. We must deal with these refractory

servants first. Strikes! In my village! That we should live to see it. Shush-h-h! I hear Bonsor. His step is heavier than his wits."

Bonsor entered, very deprecating. He bobbed his head to Lady Pomfret, greeted the Squire perfunctorily, and sat gingerly upon a chair near the desk which the Squire indicated with a wave of his hand.

"Well, Bonsor, I can see by your face that you have something unpleasant to tell me."

Bonsor "bobbed" again.

"Don't bob, man! Out with it!"

"You promised to let me have those estimates for the drainage of the water meadows."

"Um! Fishpingle has them. They shall be sent up this afternoon."

"Thank you, Sir Geoffrey. The coal has been ordered, a truck. Can you tell me what was paid for the last delivery, per ton?"

"No, I can't. But I'll let you know."

"One more matter, Sir Geoffrey. The bill for the chancel repairs is heavier than I expected. If you could go over the accounts with Mr. Hamlin——"

"Later. Not to-day."

"That is all, I think, for this morning."

He rose, smiling, bobbed again, and went out. Sir Geoffrey raised hands and eyes to the ceiling.

"Why, Mary, do I have such a lot of chuckle-headed ignoramuses in my employ? I ask you —why?"

She replied gravely:

"Because, dear, you love to have your own people about you, which is so nice and endearing of you."

"Thankless swine! I feel a draught. Is a window open? Yes. Who opened it?"

He shut the window and returned to the sofa upon which Lady Pomfret was sitting. He sat beside her, took her hand in his, and patted it gently.

"Now, Mary, I sent for you because I want you to see Ben and bring him to his senses."

"Oh-h-h-h!"

"I am prepared to be magnanimous. I must make allowance for poor Ben's irritability and quick temper. I have no doubt whatever that he is thoroughly ashamed of himself. And well aware as I am of his shortcomings, I have never questioned his devotion to you. Will you see him?"

"If you wish it, Geoffrey."

"I do wish it. You can tell him that I am prepared to accept an apology. I make this concession for your sake, my dear."

She smiled at him, with a lift of her delicate brows.

"Oh, thank you, Geoffrey."

"Not at all. God knows that I'm perfectly content with bread and cheese and a glass of ale, but I have to think of you and Margot. It is most unfortunate that our servants should have chosen such a moment to defy me. As for Lionel, I cannot trust myself to speak of him to you."

Lady Pomfret attempted no defence of her son. And the thought of the approaching interview with Fishpingle was distressing her. What could she say to Ben? What would he say to her? Her attention was distracted, however, by the appearance of Margot, evidently clothed for the road, and looking more than ordinarily alert and sprightly. Somehow she gave the impression of speed, whenever she donned her motoring kit, of excess speed. Lady Pomfret, looking up at her, said to herself, "We could never have kept up with her."

She greeted her hosts gaily, as if nothing had happened. This is a great gift given to few. No young lady of her years could skate so gracefully and swiftly over the thinnest ice.

"My Rolls-Royce will be round in five minutes."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Squire. "Surely you will stay to luncheon?"

"Dear Sir Geoffrey, how could I put you to the inconvenience of entertaining me at such a moment? My maid tells me that all your servants are on strike."

"All of 'em?" gasped the Squire.

Lady Pomfret murmured soothingly:

"Your maid, dear Margot, is mistaken."

"I hope so." She continued briskly, having rehearsed what she spoke of afterwards as "my little song and dance." To fly from any storm was instinctive, but her determination to trail clouds of glory remained distinctive. "Probably. But the strike is on. It may spread. It may

be declared off. That depends altogether on——"

"Them," the Squire rapped out.

"You," she corrected him charmingly. "The situation, however lamentable, is in your hands. Really—it is a tremendous opportunity. I see you, Sir Geoffrey, seizing that opportunity, hugging it to your heart."

The Squire stared at her.

"You see that, do you? I see fog—pea-soup fog. Lift that fog, and I shall be your obliged servant."

She laughed joyously.

"*You* will lift the fog. I preach Peace with Honour. This is your chance to give an admiring world an object lesson. I am speaking, of course, of this strike in your household, of your decision about Prudence and Alfred. That decision will become the talk of the countryside. With the rare exception of half a dozen potentates like yourself, public opinion will range itself with the young people. Now, believe me, such authority as you exercise with absolute sincerity and good faith is being indicted all over the kingdom. You know that, and deplore it. So do I. But—there we are! And if that authority is to be sustained—this is my little point—it must give way under certain irresistible pressure—*reculer pour mieux sauter!* Send for this nice-looking pair, rebuke them fittingly for any slight impertinence, and then forgive them handsomely. Place the responsibility of marriage upon them. Ease yourself of the odium of

preventing such a marriage. Such a gallant recognition of the rights of others will endear you to your people. Now, forgive me for speaking my mind."

Lady Pomfret wondered whether her little ladyship had spoken all her mind. Was she pleading indirectly for Lionel and Joyce? How clever of her to leave them out! She glanced at her husband, frowning and ill at ease. What were his thoughts? He said heavily:

"You mean well, my dear, and I thank you. What you have said will receive my due consideration."

"Je ne demande que ça!" She swept him a curtsey, and then turned to Lady Pomfret. Her voice softened delightfully:

"You have been sweet to me. Thank you for your gracious hospitality. I hate kissing, but may I kiss you?"

She bent down and kissed the softly tinted cheek. Lady Pomfret answered tremulously:

"Perhaps another visit, at a happier time, will make you forget what has passed."

Margot held out her hand to Sir Geoffrey.

"Good-bye, Sir Geoffrey. You have a charming son. If you will give him my love, I don't think he will misunderstand me."

Sir Geoffrey stood erect, very impassive.

"I will see you to your car."

"As a favour to me—don't! I disturbed you just now. Let me pop off quietly. *Au revoir!*"

Half protesting, he consented, opening the

door for her to pass out. She blew another kiss to Lady Pomfret, just before she vanished. The Squire came back to his wife, who was reflecting that her visitor had a knack at exits and entrances.

"Rather a spoiled beauty," growled the Squire. "These London girls are all alike. I thought she looked scraggy, Mary. Thin blood —thin blood. An uncle died in an asylum."

"Heavens! You never told me."

The Squire glanced at the clock.

"Now, my dear, Ben is almost due. Tackle —him."

"What can I say? What *can* I say?"

"Make him see himself, as you see him."

Lady Pomfret became alert. Her eyes sparkled as she repeated reflectively:

"As I see him?"

The Squire answered trenchantly:

"Do that and all will be well. I shall leave you now, and smoke a cigar on the terrace. Give me a call, if you want me."

Lady Pomfret looked steadily at him; he smiled at her reassuringly. As he was selecting a cigar he heard her voice.

"You mean exactly what you say, Geoffrey? I am to make Ben see himself as I see him?"

"Yes."

He lit his cigar, puffed at it, and bent down, chuckling, to tap her cheek. Standing at the door he said a last word:

"When you have pulverised him, put your dear head out o' window and beckon to me. I'll

nip in to receive his apology. And don't forget! I'm doing this for you."

Left alone, Lady Pomfret leaned her head upon her hand. She knew what had passed between master and man, just the bare recital of the facts from the Squire's mouth without further comment from him. The fact that he had invited comment and seemed, indeed, to shrink from it, made things a little easier for her. Like Lionel, he wished to spare her pain and anxiety. That was obvious. Also he considered that he could deal with the situation without her. But had he an inkling of her real feelings? And when he learnt the truth, how would he take it?

She heard a small clock chime the half-hour.

A minute later Fishpingle and Charles came in. Charles carried several books. Fishpingle was dressed in a dark grey suit, and she noticed at once that he had ceased to be the butler. He bore himself with quiet dignity, but his face indicated vigils, being very pale and haggard. Charles placed the books upon the desk and retired. Lady Pomfret rose.

"My poor Ben!"

She held out her hand with a gracious gesture. He took it reverently, bowing over it. She saw that he was too moved to speak. Placidly she continued:

"You look worn. Did you get any sleep last night?"

"I was busy with the books, my lady," he replied evasively.

She sighed.

"I have not slept at all. Sir Geoffrey has asked me to see you first." She hesitated for a moment, choosing her words slowly. "He has laid upon me a strange injunction."

"Strange, my lady?"

"Yes. For the first time in my life, Ben, I shall try to obey not the spirit but the letter of that injunction. Please sit down! How tired you look!"

He sat down facing her with his back to the great chimney-piece. As he did so, she glanced at the only family portrait in the room, a picture which hung above the mantelpiece, a full-length likeness of Sir Rupert Pomfret, the Squire's father, taken in hunting-kit. It had been painted shortly before his death, when he was still a young man. Lady Pomfret turned her eyes upon Fishpingle as she sat down upon the sofa.

She murmured almost to herself:

"It's an extraordinary thing, Ben, but you have served the Pomfrets so long and faithfully that you have actually come to look like them."

And again she glanced at the portrait.

Fishpingle replied formally:

"It may be so, my lady."

"It is so. Have you seen Master Lionel?"

"Last night, my lady. I delivered Sir Geoffrey's message. I would not hurt you or distress you for the world——"

"Do you think I don't know that?"

"Master Lionel means to marry Miss Joyce."

"Ah!" Their eyes met; she smiled faintly. "I seek his happiness."

"The happiness you have always sought for others, my lady, is reflected on your own face now."

She said tranquilly: "And on yours, my old friend."

She paused, still smiling at him. Then, holding up her head, she spoke the words which he desired to hear above all others.

"My son has chosen the right wife."

The effect of them upon Fishpingle was startling and disconcerting. Colour flowed into his cheeks; his eyes sparkled; his voice broke with emotion.

"You—you say that. And I doubted. I dared to doubt. May God forgive me!"

"My sympathies are with Alfred, Lionel, and you."

"Master Lionel let you tell me that. How good of him!"

Her tones deepened:

"But I know my husband. I know his strength and his weakness. He will not surrender to any arguments or entreaties of mine, although he loves me dearly. He is saturated with a sense of his own undivided responsibilities. He believes that he is acting according to his lights. He believes that I think as he does. He believes, poor dear fellow! that at this moment I am *pulverising* you."

Fishpingle gasped out: "You are."

"What can you mean, Ben?"

He burst into vehement speech, and again she was oddly reminded of Sir Geoffrey, who would sit silent, impassive, if he chanced to be deeply moved, and then suddenly explode.

"At the back of my mind, at the bottom of my heart, I have always feared that this sad day might dawn. And I knew what bitter strife would mean to you, who have always loved peace. It does *pulverise* me that you should be brought into this misery."

He covered his face with his hands. Lady Pomfret gave him time. Presently she went on:

"If I obey Sir Geoffrey literally, I am to try to make you see yourself as I see you."

He looked up, puzzled at the delicate irony of her tone. She faltered a little.

"It's not an easy task, Ben, for a woman who loves her husband, a woman who—who shrinks from exalting another man at his expense."

"Don't attempt it, my lady!"

"Ah! But I must. I see you so clearly this morning. I see you, not as you sit there, worn and sad, but as I saw you first when Sir Geoffrey came courting me. What a handsome fellow you were, Ben, in those far off days."

Unconsciously, Fishpingle sat more upright. He lifted his head. For a moment youth came back to him. Lady Pomfret continued:

"Even then I used to wonder at your devotion to Sir Geoffrey. I have gone on

wondering ever since, although custom tempered that wonder. It amazed me, I remember, that you didn't marry. It amazes me still." As he remained silent, avoiding her eyes, she went on gently: "I understand. There must have been somebody, some girl whom you cared for deeply, and who didn't return your love."

"Yes."

"I guessed so. I trust that I shall never know her name, for if she belonged to us, I—I should hate her."

She spoke almost viciously.

"You will never know her name, my lady."

"Ah! Now I understand your devotion to us. I see you more clearly than ever, Ben. Out of a great disappointment and sorrow you have risen to heights. I am proud indeed to be your friend."

She stood up. He rose with her. Some subtle strength, radiating from her, infused itself into him. More and more she marvelled that this man could have been content with a subordinate position. And the wretched conviction shook her that never could he return to the pantry as a servant. She heard his voice thanking her with no taint of obsequiousness. They confronted each other as equals.

"There!"

The exclamation was one of relief. She had spoken, relieved herself of a responsibility. Her tone became lighter, more persuasive.

"I have obeyed Sir Geoffrey's injunction in the letter. Now for the spirit. He will be lost

without you. He was lost this morning. I have never seen him look so wretched. And he will make everybody else as wretched as himself. To ask you to do what he expects, to apologise, to take up your faithful service again as if nothing had happened—that is impossible. Not even to keep you with us would I dare to suggest such a humiliation. But—can nothing be done?"

To her surprise, he made no response to an appeal which she could see plainly had moved him tremendously. Her surprise deepened as he half turned, staring intently at the portrait of Sir Rupert. Then he said abruptly:

"I will see Sir Geoffrey."

"Shall I call him now?"

He bowed.

Lady Pomfret went to the window, opened it, and called:

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey!"

His voice came back bluffly, jovially:

"I am here, Mary. I'll be with you in one moment."

She shut the window and returned to Fishpingle.

"Do you wish to see the Squire alone, Ben?"

He bowed again. Was he too upset to speak? She hesitated, puzzled by his manner and expression.

"But—suppose he asks me to stay?" Fishpingle made a gesture. "If he asks me to stay, Ben, I shall do so."

He replied formally :

"As your ladyship pleases."

Sir Geoffrey entered, with a half-smoked cigar between his fingers. He had assumed a somewhat jaunty deportment. Nether-Apple-white air, fresh from the downs, had blown away the fog. He was prepared to be "magnanimous." Margot's advice "Forgive them handsomely!" simmered in his thoughts. He would make the young people happy and grateful, if Ben apologised. For the moment, Lionel's affair was pigeon-holed. His house must be put in order without delay.

As he advanced towards his wife, the Squire shot a keen glance at Fishpingle, standing in the centre of the room. His heart warmed towards an old friend who looked, b' Jove! confoundedly down in the mouth, with a complexion the colour of skilly.

He said pleasantly :

"Good morning, Ben."

"Good morning, Sir Geoffrey."

CHAPTER XVIII

LADY POMFRET met the Squire before he reached his desk and laid her hand upon his arm. That familiar touch was the one needful to reassure him. My lady had made old Ben see himself as he was. He smiled at her complacently:

"Well, Mary?"

"Ben wishes to speak to you alone."

This information disconcerted the Squire, but only for a moment. Ben, of course, had his pride. Naturally he would hate "to climb down" in the presence of his beloved mistress. But that must be considered part of the penalty imposed by Authority. Without discipline, in a big establishment—where on earth were you? Nevertheless, he answered very pleasantly:

"Alone, Mary? There is nothing that Ben can say to me which cannot be said in your presence. And I hope," he inflated a little, "that what he *will* say will be said handsomely and before you, my dear."

Lady Pomfret glanced at Fishpingle. He made no sign. With a little shrug of her shoulders and a tiny lift of the eyebrows, she returned to her sofa. The Squire stared fixedly at the books brought in by Charles.

"What are these?"

Fishpingle moved nearer to the desk.

"My private books, Sir Geoffrey. The files of accounts and the ledger you have seen already. These are supplementary, memoranda connected with stockbreeding, copies of letters, information that will be of service to Mr. Bonsor. The cellar and plate books are with them, carefully checked. This is my book." He indicated a thin red account-book.

Sir Geoffrey sat down, saying curtly:

"I am much obliged. I have no doubt whatever that everything is in perfect order. To prove that conviction, I shall not trouble to look at these accounts and memoranda."

"As you please, Sir Geoffrey."

Lady Pomfret observed lightly but meaningly:

"Sir Geoffrey, Ben, is well aware that for many years you have acted as his honorary land agent."

The Squire frowned. He was not, as yet, well aware of this fact. However, under the circumstances he allowed the remark, not a tactful one, to pass. Fishpingle said quietly:

"Thank you, my lady."

Sir Geoffrey pushed aside the books, clearing his desk and his throat at the same moment. Then he looked at his wife.

"I take it, my dear Mary, that you have done—ahem!—as I asked you."

Lady Pomfret displayed slight nervousness. Her voice, as she replied, was not quite under

control. But Fishpingle, not the Squire, noticed this. And he saw, also, that her fingers interlaced upon her lap were trembling.

"I have done my best, Geoffrey. I think that Ben does, perhaps, have a glimpse of himself as I see him." She flashed a glance at Fishpingle. "Do you, Ben?"

"Yes, my lady."

The Squire rubbed his hands, leaning forward. The adjustment of his strained relations with a faithful butler adumbrated the recognition of his authority by his son. Almost, he was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Capital! I shall not be hard on you, Ben. I flatter myself that I can—a—stand in another fellow's shoes. The long and short of it all is that I want to—a—spare your feelings as much as possible, but—to go back to the very beginning—you made the wrong start."

Fishpingle smiled. A sense of humour may be lively in a man who, all his life, has been constrained to suppress it, but occasionally it crops to the surface.

"It is perfectly true, Sir Geoffrey. My Christian name was chosen by your grandmother, Lady Alicia, on that account."

Sir Geoffrey winced. To cover his confusion he said hastily:

"Did my grandmother choose it? I was not aware of it."

"Her ladyship was my godmother."

"So she was—so she was. Well, with the best intention in the world, my poor grandmother

made rather a pet of you, Ben. B' Jove! she liked you better than she did me. And that is the marrow of the matter. She deliberately educated you above your station. Mind you, I don't blame you for helping yourself generously of—a—drinking deeply of—a——"

Fishpingle came to his rescue.

"The Pierian Spring, Sir Geoffrey."

"Just so. A little knowledge, Ben, is a dangerous thing, what?"

Lady Pomfret made another observation.

"Ben has a great deal of knowledge, Geoffrey. He has saved you buying an Encyclopædia Britannica."

Again Sir Geoffrey frowned, wondering what my lady was "at." Why these tactless interruptions? He admonished her quietly:

"Please, my dear, please! Ben's knowledge of my affairs has been dangerous. Proof? It has brought us to this abominable pass. As I smoked my cigar on the terrace just now—— Where is it?" He picked it up. "Confound it! It's gone out." He flung it aside. "Where was I? Yes, yes; as I smoked my cigar I thought of Cardinal Wolsey, poor fellow, and bluff King Hal—bless him! Well, well, we mustn't let our thoughts wander. There is an Eastern proverb: 'As the sands of the desert are—are——'"

Fishpingle finished the quotation:

"'As the sands of the desert are to the weary traveller, so is overmuch speech to him who loveth silence.'"

"Quite! Quite! Now, Ben, I am prepared to meet you half-way. Prudence, all said and done, is your kinswoman not mine. Strongly as I feel about first cousins marrying, I have made up my mind to abide by what I wrote. For her ladyship's sake, I consent to reinstate Prudence and Alfred in my establishment, and to sanction a marriage——"

"Thank you, Sir Geoffrey."

"Against which I, personally, protest."

If the Squire expected effusive gratitude, he was disappointed. Fishpingle said respectfully:

"The young people have left the house, Sir Geoffrey, but they will be glad enough to come back."

"I should think so. We come now to Mr. Lionel. For the future we had better speak of him as *Mister* Lionel, till—a—he becomes Captain Pomfret." Fishpingle bowed. "So far, you have acted as go-between. You are aware that he is absolutely dependent on me."

"He has his pay, Geoffrey," murmured Lady Pomfret.

"Tchah! He is, I repeat, absolutely dependent on me. Give me time, and I can deal adequately and temperately with the young hothead. As for Miss Joyce, Ben, between ourselves, and from my knowledge of her father, that young lady will not be permitted to enter any family where she is not heartily welcomed by a majority of its members."

Having thus expressed himself, magisterially, the Squire relaxed mind and body. He lay back

in his big chair and smiled genially. To his immense surprise, Fishpingle remained silent. Lady Pomfret spoke:

"There are only three members of our family, Geoffrey, and Joyce will be heartily welcomed by two of them."

The Squire stared at her. She met his eyes steadily. Utterly confounded, he stammered out:

"Did you say, Mary, two of 'em?"

"Yes. Lionel and—myself."

Sir Geoffrey sprang to his feet, alert and furious.

"Good God!"

Lady Pomfret said mildly:

"I fear this is a shock to you."

He looked apoplectic. Even now, realisation that his wife sided against him had not quite come to him.

"A shock," he repeated, "a shock? It's positively an—an—what word do I want?"

By long force of habit, he turned to his faithful henchman.

"An earthquake?" suggested Fishpingle.

"Yes. Thank you, Ben. This is an earthquake. I—I feel as if the foundations of my life had been—a—undermined. Not a word, I beg you."

He walked to the window and, for the second time that morning, flung it wide open. The familiar landscape met his gaze. Vaguely, he became aware of the smooth lawn, the terrace, the clumps of trees—his beloved possessions. But the vision of them was blurred. An old

hunter, turned into the park to end his days there, was grazing near the deer. His eyes dwelt upon this faithful friend. If he went up to old Champion, would the horse savage him? He felt "savaged" by his wife. That was his first lucid impression. The animal instinct to "hit back" tore at him. With a tremendous effort he controlled it. He turned. Fishpingle had not moved. Lady Pomfret sat still on the sofa, looking down. He approached her.

"You—you are against me in this, Mary?"

"Yes, alas!" she sighed.

"You have been conspiring with Ben. You, my wife, have entered into a cursed league with my—servant?"

She replied tranquilly:

"I obeyed the letter of your injunction, Geoffrey. I tried to make your—your 'servant' see himself as I see him. And I see him more and more clearly as the one man I know who has subordinated his interests, his ambitions, his advancement, to ours. I see him exalted far above us—this friend of many years."

"My lady!" exclaimed Fishpingle.

Sir Geoffrey remained speechless for some moments. His voice broke as he answered her:

"I cannot trust myself to reply to you, Mary. But I say this—you have made a fool of me." He turned sharply to Fishpingle. "This means that you are not prepared to offer me an apology?"

"I am not, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire addressed his wife, peremptorily:

"Please leave us, Mary."

Lady Pomfret stood up. The two men gazed at her, each profoundly moved in different ways. To each she revealed herself as mistress of the situation. Never had her quality shone out so unmistakably. Her serenity came back, and with it an indescribable emanation of power—that undeniable authority founded not upon tradition and pride of place, but radiating dazzlingly from a pure and sincere heart. To Fishpingle she seemed transfigured; to Sir Geoffrey, for the moment, she had ceased to be his wife. She moved slowly to Fishpingle.

"God bless you, my dear Ben."

Sir Geoffrey opened the door. His courtesy didn't fail him.

Lady Pomfret paused before she passed through. Her voice was clear and sweet:

"And may God bless all you do, my dear husband."

Sir Geoffrey closed the door.

He went back to the open window, hoping, possibly, to inhale inspiration from Nether-Applewhite air. Really, he was gasping for air, like a boxer after a stiff bout. And yet, flustered as he was, he remained the slave of habit. Always he had pigeon-holed affairs of importance, dealing drastically with little things, purging his mind of them first, so that he could approach the big thing with a clear brain. Sound policy! At this crisis, when, as he put it, the foundations of life seemed to be crumbling, when *his* wife and

his son arraigned *his* authority, he returned, like an old hound, to the original line, bent upon pulling down his quarry. His wife had failed him! The greater reason that he should not fail. In his own words, "Ben must be downed." To achieve this with dignity and courtesy engrossed his energies and attention.

He left the window, and took up a commanding position on the hearthrug, with his back to the portrait of his father. He began temperately, sensible that it behoved him to set an example of good temper and forbearance:

"I have made allowances for you, Ben. I have assumed part of the blame for what took place yesterday, because it is true that you've worked faithfully for me and mine. But no servant can speak as you spoke to me and remain in my service. The thing is unthinkable—impossible. And yet, you offer no apology."

He spoke so kindly, with such sincere amazement, that Fishpingle evaded the issue.

"Consider the years I've been here, Sir Geoffrey, and all, all that the dear old place means to me."

"That, Ben, is a reason for behaving so that you can still belong to us."

The Squire felt more at his ease again. He told himself that he was dealing faithfully with a misguided man. Fishpingle's next words confirmed this faith.

"I am grieved to have angered you, deeply grieved."

"Ah! Now, Ben, we are coming together."

"Are we, Sir Geoffrey? I wish that it were so. But how—how can I stand up as a man and say that I'm wrong when I feel here," he struck his chest, "that I'm—right?"

The Squire cocked his chin at a more obtuse angle.

"By God! It's I that am wrong, is it?"

Fishpingle answered very slowly:

"You have been very generous about Prudence and Alfred. But—there's Mr. Lionel. He's your only son, Sir Geoffrey. If he dies unmarried, strangers will come here. Strangers"—he glanced round the beautiful room—"will live here. Is it wrong of me to think so much of that? Wasn't I brought up at Nether-Applewhite? Didn't I play with you as a child—an only child, too?"

"That will do, Ben. What you say moves me, as it moves you. But, if you are to remain here, we must change our relations."

Fishpingle murmured almost inaudibly:

"Yes, yes; our relations must be changed."

There was a long pause. The Squire fidgeted. He repudiated sentiment, but sentiment was gripping him. The distress upon Fishpingle's face pleaded eloquently for him.

"Come, come, Ben. Don't be an obstinate old fool! Beg my pardon handsomely, and have done with it. Damn it! I'll bribe you, b' Jove! You shall have Bonsor's billet, and his house, and poke your nose into everything till—till the end."

Overcome by his own magnanimity, the Squire blew his nose sonorously.

"I have always wanted that, Sir Geoffrey. It's a big bribe. But, there's Mr. Lionel—— "

The Squire lost his temper.

"What has Mr. Lionel got to do with you, Ben? I've let you have your way about Prudence. B' Jove! I'll take no more of this from any one out of my family."

"You are proud of your family, Sir Geoffrey, and so am I. I've a natural right to speak plainly to you."

The Squire was arrested by his tone.

"A natural right? What d'ye mean?"

Fishpingle hesitated; he stretched out his hands.

"I want to go fishing and rabbiting with Mr. Lionel's children."

"Tchah! So you shall—so you shall. Dammy, don't I know that you're proud of the family; and it shouldn't be difficult for you to own up that you've treated the head of it shabbily. There, now—there!"

He smiled again, seeing Fishpingle as a boy. A ferret carried by the Squire in his coat pocket had bitten him in the throat. Ben had pulled the beast off. Lady Alicia had ordered that coat to be burnt, because the polecat scent offended her aristocratic nose. What jolly days those were, to be sure!

"Yes—I've been wrong," murmured Fishpingle.

"Ah!" The Squire chuckled a little.

Fishpingle added incisively :

"I should have told you, long ago, and gone away."

"Gone away? Is the man daft? Told me —what?"

"Things you have never guessed. Will you sit down at your desk, Sir Geoffrey?"

The Squire stared at him, amused rather than angry.

"Upon my word," he said, "this is beginning to look like a case for a doctor. You ask me to sit down in my own room. Very well!"

He moved to a chair which faced the desk, and sat down.

"Pardon me, Sir Geoffrey, I asked you to sit at your desk."

"Um! You are evidently not quite in your right mind, Ben. However——"

He crossed to the desk and sat down, staring at Fishpingle, who, to his amazement, took his place on the hearthrug.

"Does anything strike you, Sir Geoffrey? God knows that I want the light to come to you not too suddenly."

"I am helplessly in the dark."

"Please look at Sir Rupert's portrait, and then at me."

Sir Geoffrey did so, and was none the wiser. He said as much. Fishpingle said quietly :

"I am his son."

Sir Geoffrey jumped up.

"My father's son—you. It's a wicked lie."

"Is it? Look again!"

Sir Geoffrey glared first at Fishpingle and then at the picture. He said irresolutely:

"No, no—it can't be. And yet—and yet, there *is* a look. My father's—son?"

"Yes."

"How long have you known this?"

"Since Lady Alicia died."

"My grandmother knew?"

"Everything."

"Is there evidence to support this—a—affirmation?"

Fishpingle put his hand into his pocket and produced a bundle of letters.

"These."

He moved to the desk and handed them to the Squire, continuing in the same quiet voice:

"They were written by Sir Rupert to my mother. If you glance at one you will recognise the handwriting."

Sir Geoffrey untied the silk riband, and took the first letter. He put on his pince-nez. As he did so, Fishpingle saw that his fingers were trembling. He took off the pince-nez and rubbed the lenses, but they were clean and clear.

"It is my father's writing."

"Read the beginning and the end."

Sir Geoffrey did so. The letter fluttered from his hand. He lay back in his chair, murmuring: "His Dream Wife! His Dream Wife!" Then, as another thought came to him, he jumped up excitedly.

"My father calls your mother his 'dream wife.' Does that mean that he married her? Are you his lawful son—his elder son?"

Fishpingle drew himself up.

"No. I am a Son of Sorrow."

"My God! My God!"

"I would not have you think ill of my mother. Sir Rupert wished to marry her. It is all in those letters. I am proud of the woman to whom they were written. This is her miniature."

He handed the miniature to Sir Geoffrey, who gazed at it long and searchingly.

"A beautiful creature, Ben, and a good."

"Yes. She gave to the man she loved everything; she asked nothing. This letter," he took another from his pocket, "was written to me by Lady Alicia. I read it first, standing by her grave."

"I want no more proof, Ben."

"Please read it."

Sir Geoffrey did so. This was the letter:

"My dear Boy,

"I have never had the courage to speak to you of your father, although, before he died, he made me promise to tell you the whole truth. I prefer to write it, so that it may serve, if necessary, as evidence. Your father was my eldest son, Rupert. It is needless to tell you anything about your mother, because I have often spoken to you about her. You will understand her better still when you read the letters which my executor will give to you after my death and look at the miniature which was painted of her for your father. He wished to marry her. She was devoted to me, and devoted to your father. She refused to marry him steadfastly, but she might have

done so had I not exacted a sort of pledge from her. And then, they ran away together and lived for a year in a queer little village called Fishpingle, where you were born, and where your mother died. I promised her to look after you and to educate you. That was her great wish—that you should rise above her level. I sign myself for the first and last time

"Your loving Grandmother,

"ALICIA POMFRET."

The Squire replaced the letter in its envelope. As he gave it back to Fishpingle, he asked hoarsely:

"Have you forgiven our grandmother?"

"There was nothing to forgive. My dear lady, had her son wished to marry Prudence, would have done the same. I am Pomfret enough to understand that."

The Squire nodded, murmuring:

"And yet, if my father had got his way, you would be sitting in this chair—the Lord of the Manor."

Fishpingle repeated the words softly:

"The Lord of the Manor."

Sir Geoffrey stood up. He moved slowly towards Fishpingle, slightly bent, with bowed head. Then he held out his hand.

"My—brother." He raised his head and his voice: "And before God, Ben, you have been my brother. For more than fifty years."

"Happy years!"

"Ben, what can I do for you—what *can* I do?"

Fishpingle answered simply:

"The thing nearest my heart is the happiness

of your son, who will stand here when we are gone.''

Sir Geoffrey said hurriedly:

"I know that, I know that. I must call my wife."

"You mean to tell her?"

"I must."

"Nobody else."

"If you insist. But—have I found a brother only to lose him?"

"You know what I wish—to remain here, to help you, to help Mr. Lionel."

The Squire pressed his hand, too moved to speak. He turned abruptly, walked to the door, and opened it.

"Mary—Mary—I want you."

She must have known that she would be wanted, for she had remained near him. Her voice floated through the open door:

"I am coming, Geoffrey."

Lady Pomfret entered. She glanced at her husband's face, and then at Fishpingle standing erect near the desk. Sir Geoffrey closed the door. He was not a man to do things grudgingly. The scales had fallen from his eyes. He saw Fishpingle as clearly as his wife saw him. In a firm voice, he said to Lady Pomfret:

"Mary—I surrender unconditionally."

THE END

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